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THE SECRET OF THE OLD HOUSE

BY

EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN

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THE SECRET OF THE OLD HOUSE.

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"DO I LOOK LIKE A MEDIÆVAL MINSTREL, DINAH?"

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THE

SECRET OF THE OLD HOUSE.

A STORY FOR CHILDREN.

BY

EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN,

Author of "The Eversley Secrets;" "Little Lady Clare;" "Miriam's Ambition;" &c.

BLACKIE & SON, LIMITED,
LONDON, GLASGOW, EDINBURGH, AND DUBLIN.

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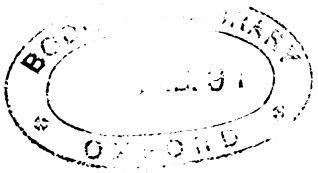

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CONTENTS.

Chap.		Page
I.	INTRODUCTORY, ...	7
II.	OUR ARRIVAL, ...	26
III.	MAKING FRIENDS, ...	43
IV.	THE OLD HOUSE, ...	59
V.	SOMETHING MYSTERIOUS, ...	78
VI.	THE SECRET DISCLOSED, ...	96
VII.	GERALD'S STORY, ...	114
VIII.	THE CAVE IN THE WOOD, ...	131
IX.	GRANDMOTHER'S STORY, ...	158
X.	GERALD'S LETTER, ...	178
XI.	RECONCILIATION, ...	195
XII.	CONCLUSION, ...	212

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ILLUSTRATIONS.

Page

"Do I look like a Mediæval Minstrel, Dinah?" . (*Frontispiece*) 85

Tim puts a Perplexing Question to Aunt Tabitha, . 52

Dinah finds Gerald Crouching in the Cave, . . . 150

Gerald and his Grandfather in the Lanes, . . . 195

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THE

SECRET OF THE OLD HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

I WAS the eldest in a family of seven children; and the eldest member of a large family—at any rate when she is a girl—has a very busy life of it, I think.

Our father was a doctor, with a large, scattered, and not very lucrative practice in the Black Country, and I could remember no other home than the brick villa on the outskirts of a smoky town, where my parents had lived during the greater portion of their married life.

Nothing can better describe the character of the place in which we lived than the expressive term "Black Country." Tall grimy chimneys and glaring furnaces covered the face of the ground as far as eye could see. The very trees, such few of them as struggled into leaf year

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by year, were rather black than green, and a smutty pall seemed during the greater part of the year to cover the ground and obscure the face of the heavens. By night the glow of the furnaces gave something of weird picturesque beauty to the landscape, and as children we were fond of gathering in a group about the high nursery window at night, to watch the crimson lights palpitating through the murky blackness; but by day it was hopelessly dull, colourless, and depressing, only that, as we had never known anything different, it did not depress us. When we read books about other children, who grew up in different surroundings—amid green fields and flowers, or by the sounding sea, we sometimes felt that such homes must be very pleasant, and wondered how it felt to see pretty things always, and live surrounded by luxuries; but we were healthy, happy children in the main, and not given to discontent. We had always plenty to do, which is one grand secret of contentment; and I, for one, seldom found time for any repinings, though I was fond of building airy castles, or of listening to Tim whilst he romanced to me of his fancies, as he greatly loved to do.

It may sound rather strange to say it, but Tim and I were more often together than any other pair in the family, although I was the eldest, nearly fifteen, and he was the youngest but one, and only

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just eight. I think it came about in this way. Mother was very ill all the winter when Tim was a baby, and nurse was so much taken up with her that I had to try and be a sort of second mother or nurse to the little new brother. He was always good with me, and soon preferred me to anybody else. Of course this pleased and flattered me very much. I thought Tim was a wonderful child, and was as proud of him as possible; and when by and by the new baby came to take up time and attention from others, Tim was left still more to my care, and he grew up to be what father called "my little shadow."

All day long Tim trotted after me. He ran errands, helped (or hindered) me at my work, sat on the floor at my feet at lesson-times, and chattered to me unceasingly when I was able to listen. Tim was not as strong as the rest of us: he had lots of little illnesses as a child, and he would have nobody to nurse him but me. His cot was in my little room, and night and day we were always together. When he was old enough to learn anything I taught him his lessons; but his head gave him a good deal of trouble, and father did not let him study much. He used sometimes to say to mother that he wished he could send him away to the sea, or to some country place for six months; but it was difficult to arrange anything like that, for we were not at

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all rich, and then, as mother said, "Tim would pine without Dinah, and really I do not see how I *could* spare her."

I liked to hear dear mother say that, and to feel I was useful to her. My name was Dinah, you must know—Dinah Meredith. When I was little I used to be quite sorry I had been given such an ugly name, and wondered how it was people did not always choose pretty names for their children, like Violet and Ethel and Winifred and Gwendolyn; but when I got older I minded much less, and the pretty way in which little Tim used to call "Din-ah! Din-ah!" all over the house, raising his voice a clear octave at the last syllable, quite reconciled me to the sound of it. Then, too, mother told me once that I was called after a younger sister of hers, who had died before she grew up, and whom they all loved very dearly, because she was so good and gentle and patient. And I used to think a good deal about my young Aunt Dinah, whom I had never known, and wonder what she was like, and if I should ever be as good as she was; and when Tim and I played "talking games," as we often did when I was busy with my needle, one of our favourites was that I was Aunt Dinah when she was a grown-up young lady, and he was "Prince Charlie," whom she was first to hide away in her house from pursuing enemies, and after-

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ward to marry when he had "got his own again."

I'm afraid my teaching of history to Tim did not take a very practical shape, nor did it grow any more practical under his manipulation. For one thing, the histories I read were more interesting than accurate, and I much preferred the stories of hair-breadth escapes and romantic perils of favourite heroes than any analysis of their conduct from a constitutional stand-point. Naturally, therefore, Tim and I were red-hot Royalists and Jacobites, and our favourite portions of history were those that told of the perils, the successes, and the woes of the hapless house of Stuart.

Tim and I were the only members of the family who cared for these imaginative games, wherein we personated historical characters and went through all kinds of perils and adventures. We played such games by the hour together, and almost every book I read furnished us with new characters and situations; but none of the rest sympathized with us in the least, nor could they see any fun in such a very quiet pastime.

The two boys who came next to me had their own noisy games of a distinctly concrete character, and the pair of girls (who were also twins,) were devoted to dolls, and played no games in which they could not take a share. Baby had

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already allied herself to them, and Tim and I were left to talk and dream and invent to our heart's content.

Some people found some difficulty in understanding Tim, and said he did not speak clearly; but I never could understand what they meant, it was always clear enough to me. People said, too, that he was backward, and in some ways perhaps he was, for he could not learn by rote as easily as other children do; but he made up for everything, in my opinion, by his power of thinking and his vivid imagination. He was much cleverer at making up a game and planning it all out than I was; and when I read to him about the plots and plans that real people in history had had to make, he seemed to understand them better than I did, and would often improve upon them very much in our games.

"If I'd only been there," he sometimes said, "I know I'd have got Charles the First out of Carisbrook Castle. I can't think what they were all thinking about. I'd not have let his head be cut off if I'd been there." And I believe I had a conviction myself that if only Tim and I had been on the spot, the fate of the murdered monarch might have been averted! I daresay a great many children have felt the same in their time.

But I must get on with the real thread of my story.

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When I was just fifteen I had a long illness, the first serious illness I had ever suffered from. It was typhoid fever, and father thought I must have taken it from some of the places where his patients lived, and where the sanitary conditions were very bad. I often used to take them little puddings, or cans of soup, when they were very poor, and as I had not been quite as strong as usual for several months, it was not very strange, I suppose, that I should be susceptible to any poison of that kind. At any rate I fell ill about the middle of January, and it was March before I was up and about again.

March is not a very nice month in any place, but I think in the Black Country it is worse than it can be anywhere else. The east wind seems as if it would cut you in half when you step out of doors, and it goes on blowing hard for weeks together, as if nothing could ever get it to change. I do not think, however, that I really thought much about the unpleasantness of the east wind until I was beginning to get better, and was kept indoors day after day because it was too cold for me to be out.

I was not used to being ill, and as little used to being idle, and I hardly know which experience I found the harder. There were piles and piles of garments in mother's basket waiting to be mended; for not only had my fingers been seven

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or eight weeks idle, but mother's time had been much occupied in nursing me. I longed now that I was downstairs again to set to work to reduce those dreadful-looking piles; but in less than half an hour my eyes would begin to swim, and my head and back to ache, and if I did not put down my needle then and there, I used to get so tired that if anybody spoke to me it used almost to make me cry.

Indeed I had never cried in all my life so much as I did that dreary March. I often felt so miserable that I hardly knew what to do with myself, and I was all the more unhappy because I felt it so wrong to repine when I was getting better and stronger every week, and when everybody had been so kind to me.

Tim was my great comfort during these dull, long days, for mother was too busy to be with me much. But she made me use the drawing-room as a sort of private sitting-room of my own, which was very kind indeed of her; and Tim and I spent almost all our time quietly there together, cheering each other up as best we could (for he was not very well either, nor had been all the winter), and vaguely wishing that something might happen to break the rather dreary monotony of our lives.

We did not in the least anticipate, however, that this wish would be realized; and when we

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one day heard that what we had desired was actually coming upon us, we were quite doubtful at first whether or not we were pleased. I for my part felt quite as much fear as elation at the unexpected prospect suddenly opened out before our eyes.

It was towards dusk, on a day that had been unusually depressing, when the wonderful news was broken to us by mother. Tim and I were both pining sadly to go out again; for just now he was as close a prisoner as I was, and being younger, felt the confinement almost more. We knew a certain bank about a mile and a half away, in the direction of what we called "the country," where there were a few sickly primrose roots nestling undisturbed amid the roots of a stunted oak. This bank was in so secluded a spot, down a narrow, untrodden, ugly lane, that we looked upon it as a sort of private property of our own, and after February had once gone, we always made excursions there once or twice a week to visit "our primroses," as we called them, and watch for the proud day on which we could bring the first blossom home to mother. I think if Tim and I had lived in the country we should have been great gardeners, for we loved such flowers as we could rear in the little patch of ground behind the house with passionate intensity, and had it not been that the atmosphere

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about us poisoned nearly all the plants we tried to grow, we should have had quite a gay little parterre of our own. As it was, the difficulties against which we had to contend were so great that we often almost despaired of our own garden, which caused us to value all the more our precious primroses that struggled into existence year by year without any artificial assistance. Our extra sadness to-day was partly caused by our conviction that we should not this year get our precious flowers; in addition to which was Tim's gloomy prognostication, that as we weren't on the spot to gather them as they came out, other people would be sure to see them, and probably not content with "stealing" the blossoms, would dig up and carry away the roots likewise. This suggestion was at once so probable and so terrible as to cause us profound depression.

Mother's advent, therefore, with an open letter in her hand came as a welcome interlude. She spoke cheerfully to us and stirred up the fire, and said kind consoling things to us; for I suppose she saw by our faces that we were dull and rather sad. Dear mother! she always entered so sweetly and tenderly into our little troubles, foolish and groundless as some of them must have appeared to her; and when Tim confided to her his fear for the safety of our precious primrose roots, she smiled a gentle smile of sym-

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pathy, yet it seemed to give her the cue she wanted for telling us a strange piece of news.

"Tim, darling!" she said, lifting him upon her lap; for though he was eight years old and had a big head, his body was very small and slight. "How would you like to go away with Dinah to a pretty place all in the country, where primroses grow like weeds all over the wood, and anemones and cowslips and violets too, and where you can find wild daffodils and wood-sorrel and Solomon's seal, and all kinds of pretty things you never saw in your life before, and perhaps never even heard of? Would you like that, little boy? Would that make up to you, do you think, for your favourite primrose roots here?"

Tim's eyes were very round with wonder. He made no attempt to answer. Perhaps we hardly expected him to; for he was not ready of speech at any time, and a new idea was always very absorbing. I felt my heart beat rather fast, for I knew mother would never have spoken like that if she had not meant that we were to be sent away from home; and however delightful the prospect of seeing woods and flowers might be, I, who had never been a single night away from home in my life, felt decidedly nervous at the prospect.

I looked anxiously at mother, and felt her glance fixed upon me. I was old enough to

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know I must not add to her many anxieties by thwarting any plan she and father might have arranged for my benefit. I had heard the other doctor advocate a change for me, as the best possible medicine, and I suppose that this change had been arranged for.

"What is it, please?" I asked as cheerfully as I could. "Are we really going away to the country, Tim and I?"

"Yes, dear, you really are next week," answered mother cheerfully; "to a very nice place indeed—such a nice place that I could almost envy you your good luck at getting an invitation."

"Do you know the place?"

"Know it? Well, I ought to do. I lived there when I was a little girl, right away up to the very day when I married father and came to live with him here."

I began to understand then.

"Oh, then we must be going to grandmother's," I said slowly.

Now, I knew that I had one grandmother living, though I had never seen her, and truth to tell I had something of an aversion for her, because it seemed to me that she could not be fond of our sweet mother, her own daughter, or she would sometimes come and see us, or ask father and mother to come and see her. I knew that

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she lived in the south somewhere, in a quaint old house that mother had often sketched, and that she showed us in several pretty pictures in her portfolio; that grandfather died many years ago, and that Aunt Tabitha, who had never married, lived always with her. Mother was the second daughter, and Dinah, who had died, was the youngest. There were never any brothers, so that grandmother and Aunt Tabitha lived quite alone together. As I said, to begin with, I had a prejudice against them, and as mother always seemed to read my thoughts, I think she read that one too.

"You are not very pleased to think of going to your grandmother's, Dinah, dear?"

"Well—not very."

"And why not, my love?"

"Because, because—well, mother, I think if she cared for you as you care for us, she would come sometimes and see you. And if she is not kind and good to you, I don't see how I can ever be fond of her; and it isn't nice living in the house of anyone you're not fond of."

Mother listened with her little quiet smile, expressive half of amusement half of criticism.

"Rushing to conclusions, Dinah, as you are so fond of doing. Grandmother has not visited us here for two very sufficient reasons. Firstly, her own health is so infirm that she never leaves

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home for a single night, nor has done for the past ten years. Secondly, there is such a houseful of us here that we could not find a nook for her anywhere, if she wished to come ever so much."

"But she never asks you there."

"Indeed, my love, you are very much mistaken. She asked us frequently, until our party became so large that she found it useless to press invitations upon us. Your father and I took you there on a visit when you were a baby, but we have not been there since. A busy doctor, and a mother with seven children, do not find visiting easy. We do not like to leave patients and children, and we cannot go about with them in a kind of caravan. Now, my love, are you satisfied? Why did you never ask these questions before if you thought there was any grievance between my mother and myself?"

"I don't know. I didn't like. Besides, I did not often think of it. Is grandmother a very strict old lady? I always fancy she is."

"Well, dear, she is more strict perhaps than your own parents have been. You will find everything rather different in her house—more particular and ceremonious, and what will perhaps seem at first 'stiff' to you. But you must try very hard to conform to her ways, and help Tim to do the same. You will have some new

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clothes to go away with, and you must try always to be neat and nice, and you must put on a pretty frock in the evenings to go down to dinner—a frock that you would think more fit for a party than for everyday wear. After a little while I think you will like the nice orderly ways of the house, though they will seem strange to you at first. But you are naturally neat and tidy, Dinah, so that I am not at all afraid of your not behaving yourself so as to give satisfaction. Tim does all you tell him, and you will not let him be a trouble to anybody else. You must remember, my love, that it is exceedingly kind of grandmother to ask you both there just at the time, when it is so advisable for you both to get a change; and whether or not it may feel a little strange at first, you will soon enjoy yourselves very much, and you must not be downhearted if you are sometimes rather home-sick. The feeling will pass away soon, and you will be as happy as the day is long."

Tim and I listened attentively to all this.

"How long are we going for?"

"I hardly know yet. It will depend upon many things. Your grandmother says that she shall keep you both till you are quite strong and robust again. It is a very kind letter, Dinah. I will leave it here, and you can read it when the lamp comes in." And then dear mother

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kissed us both and went away, for she never had time to stop long just to talk. She was generally wanted in two or three places at once.

Tim, put off mother's lap, crept up to mine, and laid his head upon it.

"Do you like it, Dinah?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet, Tim."

"Do you think it's real? Shall we have to go?"

"Oh, yes, we must go; and perhaps we shall like it when we get there. The flowers will be nice. It's only being visitors that will be so funny. I don't know what visitors do."

"Nor I. We never have visitors here. Mother would tell us though."

But I was old enough to know that mother could never tell us all the things that I should want to know when I got to a strange house. I had always been afraid of grandmother and Aunt Tabitha from my early childhood, and I felt a good deal of dismay at the thought of paying a visit to them. But I would not dishearten Tim by my fears, and he went to bed under the impression that it was on the whole a pleasant thing to be going away. I was rather of the contrary opinion. Perhaps if I had been stronger I should have minded it less, but being rather weak and out of spirits I shrank greatly from leaving mother and the familiar home, and when I went

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to bed I felt quite disposed to indulge in a burst of tears. I had read grandmother's letter, which was very kind, no doubt, but it was written in a stiff sort of formal way that chilled me more than it pleased me. There was an allusion in it, too, that I did not understand. It referred to something father had done, which seemed to have given offence, and that increased my old suspicion that grandmother had not been quite as cordial as she might have been all these years.

I was very glad, however, that I did not allow myself to cry, because very soon after I was in bed, mother came up to have a little chat.

"There is something I wanted to explain to you Dinah, my love, but it was better not to do it before Tim, as he is too young to understand. You no doubt noticed an allusion in your grandmother's letter to a past annoyance; well, I think you had better know what it was, or you may run away as you did before with an exaggerated impression. You are old enough to know, perhaps, that your father's practice here has been a disappointing one. The neighbourhood promised much better when we settled here sixteen years, ago, and we looked forward to a more prosperous time than we have really had. Your grandmother was always wishful that we should settle nearer to her; and after we had been here a few years, their own doctor fell ill, and they thought he

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would never be fit for work again. She much wished then to get your father to come down and try to get the practice into his hands, and promised him all the influence she could obtain for him in the neighbourhood; but he did not think it would be quite fair or honourable to take advantage of a misfortune on the part of another, and he declined the proposal, which vexed your grandmother at the time. I believe afterwards when Dr. Marks got better and was able to resume his duties, she saw herself how unkind it would have been for a younger and cleverer man to have set up as a rival at such a time; still his "burying himself" in the Black Country and getting on so slowly has always been rather a grievance, for grandmother lives amongst county people herself, and she would have liked her one married daughter to have got on rather more brilliantly. You must try to show her, Dinah dear, that although we are not rich or grand yet that you can be a thorough little gentlewoman, and that you love your humbler home just as well as if it had been ten times more fine. I hope some day, perhaps, we may be able to live in a prettier place and nearer to grandmother, but I should never like to gain any advantage for ourselves that was won by bringing the least bit of trouble to anyone else."

I flung my arms round mother's neck at that

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and kissed her a hundred times. I felt that I would not exchange my dear father and mother for all the gold of the Indies.

I don't know if this talk made me like grandmother any better; but I understood more how she felt, and I knew she was fond of father and mother even though she had been vexed. I much wondered what it would be like to be a visitor in her house.

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CHAPTER II.

OUR ARRIVAL.

TIM and I travelled alone, and a most wonderful journey it was. We had before this only been quite short journeys by rail—backwards and forwards into one or two big towns, when we went to see the dentist, or to do some shopping from time to time.

I don't think we had ever been twenty miles from home before, certainly we had never been beyond the region of chimney-stacks and manufacturing towns, and when we rushed on hour after hour towards the sunny genial land of the south, we hardly knew how to contain our wonder and admiration.

It was the last week in March, and the month, which had certainly come in like a lion, seemed disposed to redeem its character by going out like a lamb. It was a genial, sunshiny day, and the sun seemed to get more power as we gained the clearer atmosphere of the open country. The gorse became more and more yellow as we rushed through the sunny land, and the primroses upon

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the railway banks in places!—it seemed to our eyes as if such primroses never had been before or could be again. Our mouths fairly watered at the sight, and Tim grasped my hand so hard in his that he almost hurt me. It was like fairy-land to us both, and we could hardly speak for gazing.

After we had accomplished our last change at Basingstoke, and were safe in the carriage that should convey us to the station at which we should finally alight, my mind was more at ease, and Tim climbed up and kneeled at my side between me and the window and began to talk.

"Will it be like this when we get there, Dinah?"

"I think so, Tim. Mother says there are lots of flowers."

"May we gather them?"

"In the woods we may, but not in the garden unless they give us leave."

Tim nestled close up to my side.

"Will there be woods there, Dinah,—great big woods and forests?"

"I don't know how big they are, but I expect they will seem big to us."

"And will there be a ruin for us to play in, Dinah?"

Tim and I had never seen a ruin; but we had read about them and pictured them to ourselves, and we had a notion that the acme of all human

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happiness was to have a ruin to play in as the setting for our romantic historical games.

"I don't know, Tim. Mother did not tell us of any ruin; but the woods will do just as well."

"I should have liked a ruin though," said Tim with a little sigh. "A ruin would make things just perfect. Do people ever build *new* ruins, Dinah, when the old ones get crumbled all to nothing?"

"I shouldn't think so, Tim; they wouldn't be useful enough."

Tim was silent a while, meditating after his grave manner.

"When I'm a man," he began at last, "I shall build a whole lot of ruins, and plant ivy and things all over them, and take care of them till they get all green and pretty. I should like there to be a ruin in every wood, and when I'm big enough I'll begin to see about it. Perhaps we'll make a ruin in our wood when we get to grandmother's. We could play ten times as many games if we had one."

"We can pretend there's one, you know," I suggested, not very confident as to our constructive powers.

"Yes, we can pretend," answered Tim after a pause; "but it isn't *quite* the same, Dinah."

Tim was getting rather drowsy by this time, and he took several naps leaning against my

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shoulder. I was tired too, and not sorry to dose a little myself; but I was afraid of going off to sleep lest we should get carried on past our right destination.

It was past four by the time the train slackened at the small station where we had to alight, and Tim clutched tightly at my hand as we stood together on the platform, and saw our goods and chattels being dragged out of the big van. We were both much impressed with the cleverness of the railway officials in knowing which were our boxes, and it was a great relief to see them all safe again. Father had assured me they would turn up all right, but when I had seen all the mass of luggage stowed away in the van, I had felt that little short of a miracle could restore our own safe and sound at the other end.

By the time we had collected our boxes and parcels about us, I was a good deal startled by the apparition of a staid servant in livery, who touched his hat and inquired if we were the young lady and gentleman who were expected by Mrs. Talbot. I was so overpowered by this attention that I turned as shy as Tim, and we let ourselves be led off to the carriage as meek and sheepish a pair as could well be imagined.

Our luggage followed us on a truck, and was bestowed upon the top of the brougham in a sort of open basket made for the purpose.

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We were shut up inside, the sober-looking man mounted the box, and off we drove in state.

Not being used to a carriage, it all seemed to us grand and solemn. Some children would have enjoyed the sense of importance; but for my part I felt slightly oppressed, and Tim held my hand very tight and stared out of the window hard without attempting to speak a word.

It was a long drive to our grandmother's house, and a very pretty one. The road wound through rustic wooded country, passed many pretty villages, and crossed a countless number of streams. But for the most part the hills shut out any open view, and we could only see a little way on either side of us.

The quiet and beauty and seclusion of everything struck us in a fashion most difficult to describe. If mother had only been with us it would have been enchanting; but the sense that we were going to enter upon a new life with strangers, who would not understand us or our ways, was undeniably trying, and I quite began to dread the end of the journey and the arrival at our grandmother's house.

At length, however, I knew it must be close at hand, for we passed another village, and I recognized the church as being the original of a drawing of mother's, representing the church

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near her old home. Two or three minutes later we turned in at a big wooden gate, and drew up at a sort of porch entrance, from which point little of the house could be seen.

A man, who was, I supposed, the butler, as he wore no livery, opened the door, and then came down the steps and opened that of the carriage. I saw that there was an elderly lady in the big hall waiting for us, but whether it was grandmother or Aunt Tabitha I hardly knew. She wore a gray satin dress in very straight folds, and she had mittens on her hands, and a big mob-cap of lace and muslin on her head. She was very erect and upright and tall, and looked years and years older than mother; yet she could hardly be grandmother, I thought, because I knew grandmother was rather an invalid and seldom left her chair.

The tall old lady came forward, looking very hard at me with her bright black eyes.

"Well, child, how are you? Found your way safely here? No accidents? No loss of luggage? Very good, very good. Let the boxes go straight upstairs, Masters. Drive it round to the yard and send it straight up by the back staircase. And this is the little brother, is it? Well, I do not see much to choose between you in point of looks. But we will see if we cannot mend matters amongst us. Now, you shall come and

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see your grandmother. Wipe your feet upon the mat. Never forget to do that, whether you come in clean or dirty. It is a habit that ought always to be formed."

And then Aunt Tabitha, who had kissed us both during this speech in a quick business-like way, turned back into the house with a gesture that bid us follow her.

The hall was a nice square open place, almost like a room, and the staircase was wide with shallow steps and turns in it at about every ten stairs. Nothing could have been more unlike the narrow little modern villa in which we had always lived; the sense of space struck me greatly, and the house, though not really a very large one, long seemed to me immense.

Aunt Tabitha turned down a short wide passage to the left. There was a door on the right hand and a door on the left, and one just opposite. It was to this last one that our aunt directed her steps, and when she opened it quite a flood of sunshine poured out upon us; for the big mullioned window opposite looked due west over a pretty expanse of lawn and shrubbery, and at this hour of the day in bright weather was as cheerful a spot as one could wish to see.

There is something very reassuring in warmth and sunshine, and I took courage to go up quite boldly to our grandmother.

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She was a nice-looking old lady, very beautifully dressed as it seemed to me, but with a gentler face than Aunt Tabitha, though she had something of the same formality of manner. She looked at us very hard as we approached her chair, which was drawn close up to the glowing fire of logs; but, when she held out her wrinkled hand and drew me towards her, I was surprised at the gentleness of her manner.

"So this is little Dinah grown a great girl! When last I saw you, child, you were a baby in long clothes. Can it really be fifteen years ago? How time does fly!"

I kissed grandmother with more warmth than I had been able to throw into my greeting to Aunt Tabitha, and then I presented Tim.

"It was so kind of you to ask him too," I said, remembering what mother had said about it; "I don't think I *could* have come alone. Tim and I have never been away from one another. He was always my boy from a baby."

"As for that," put in Aunt Tabitha in her quick but not unkindly way, "I doubt if you would ever have been asked alone. Two children keep each other company and amuse one another, but one is a perpetual trouble in the house I said from the very first that if we took one we must take a pair. An oddly assorted pair we have got too, it seems."

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Grandmother meantime had kissed Tim, and was looking searchingly into his small pale face that was set now in lines of deep thought. I knew very well that look of Tim's. It meant that his mind was far away, that new ideas were pouring into his brain, and that he would presently come to me with a flood of questions about the past, or suggestions for games in the future. To some people this look was suggestive of vacancy, but not so to me. I saw that grandmother continued to hold his hand and study his face with some attention. All this time he had not spoken a single word, or answered a question. I heard Aunt Tabitha say in a low voice:

"I feared from what Marion said that the child was peculiar. I am afraid there is no doubt that he is a little wanting."

I did not speak, though I felt a little flush of indignation mount to my face. That my clever imaginative little Tim should be spoken of as "wanting!"

"Let the children have a cup of tea here, Tabitha, before they go upstairs," said grandmother. "They will be thirsty, and will want something before six. They can take a proper meal later."

Aunt Tabitha left the room, and perhaps the closing of the door, or perhaps the continuous

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searching glance bent upon him, roused Tim from his deep abstraction. He looked up and spoke.

"Can you remember Charles the First?"

It was a question sufficiently unexpected; and grandmother seemed hardly to know how to answer it.

"No, my dear," she said at length.

"Didn't you ever see him?"

"No, my dear; he died before my time."

"He didn't die, he was murdered," corrected Tim gravely. "But didn't you ever see Charles the Second, or James or Prince Charley or any of them?"

"They all died before my time."

Tim sighed and looked disappointed.

"I'm so sorry. I thought you were so old you *must* have seen some of them." Then with a gleam of inspiration he added, "I wonder if any of them lived in this house?"

"I cannot tell you that," answered grandmother, who, however, did not seem displeased at Tim's odd talk. "I do not know the past history of this house very well. But there is a big half-ruined house not far from here that held out nobly for the king in the civil war, and was half wrecked by the cannon of Cromwell and his Ironsides. Some day, perhaps, you may go and see it. The ruins are very much as

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they were left then, though another house has been built, or rather a portion of the old one has been restored. But it is all old, and more or less decaying. If you like old places you will be very happy there."

Tim's face began to glow, and he turned his eyes towards mine with a glance of such keen intelligence that I wished Aunt Tabitha could have seen it. Grandmother saw it, however, and smiled. She patted Tim's flaxen head, and said, more to me than to him:

"So we are a little student of history are we, and a little Jacobite already."

"Tim likes history better than anything else," I answered; "but I'm afraid I don't always teach him very well. I haven't had many books, and he mixes things up. Sometimes I get them mixed up too."

Grandmother smiled quite pleasantly, and Aunt Tabitha came back followed by the butler with a tray. We had each a cup of tea and a piece of cake given us, of which we were glad enough, being both hungry and thirsty. I sat to a little table, and answered questions about father and mother and home as decorously as I could, whilst Tim sat on the floor at grandmother's feet, and thought his own thoughts all the time.

Presently in a pause of conversation he lifted up his voice and addressed the following obser-

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vation, more as it seemed to the fire than to anybody in the room:

"In one of those funny little places we came through in the carriage, that Dinah said were villages, there was an inn called the 'Oliver Cromwell.' If I lived in that village I would pull that inn down, and make a great heap of it, and get barrels of gunpowder and tar and blow it all up, and burn it till there wasn't a bit of it left, and I'd make a law that no other house wasn't to be built there any more, but that it was to be left desolate for ever and ever."

Aunt Tabitha stared at Tim as if she thought he had gone clean out of his mind, and looked at grandmother and shook her head, as much as to say that things were even worse than she had feared. But grandmother had a funny little smile upon her face, and did not seem at all disconcerted by Tim's oddity. In her heart of hearts, as I discovered years later, the old lady was as staunch a Jacobite as ever lived, even in the far-off days of disturbance and rebellion, and many an ancestor of hers had suffered death or exile on behalf of the Stuarts. Therefore, however irrational Tim's ideas might be, his bold expression of sympathy with the cause she had at heart won her good-will, and delighted her not a little. Perhaps she thought that the little boy

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inherited these sympathies from his forefathers through her, and recognized in him "a chip of the old block." I knew nothing about this then, and wished that Tim would keep these aspirations of his till he could confide them to me in secret. I could not bear to see the way Aunt Tabitha looked at him, and even grandmother's smile was not entirely reassuring.

I was glad when we were taken upstairs to our own rooms. These were three nice queer little chambers opening one into the other, situated beneath the eastern gable of the house, and looking out towards the garden. There were some woods farther away, and everything was so clean and fresh and pure that it was quite delicious. Aunt Tabitha said that up here we could do what we liked if we were reasonably quiet, and that we could go up and down the back stairs at will and out into the "wilderness," as the part of the garden was called that we could see from our windows. We were, however, only to use the front stairs when we came down to meals; nor were we to have the same liberty in the flower-garden as the wilderness. We were to go there only with her or the gardener at first, until she saw how far we were to be trusted. She was very fond of her flowers, she said, and couldn't have children romping over her borders or picking her blossoms.

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We did not disclaim or protest. She would soon see for herself that we were not mischievously disposed; and meantime the wilderness was in itself a world of delight for us.

To-night we were to have a substantial tea together upstairs; but generally I was to go down to dinner at seven o'clock, and Tim was to come into dessert at half-past. At home we all dined together early, and indeed took all our meals together in the dining-room. Here we were to breakfast upstairs in our sort of nursery-room, and have tea there also. I think we liked the idea of this privacy and independence, but it gave us the impression of a formality and stateliness very different from anything we had been accustomed to.

When we were left alone after Aunt Tabitha's departure, the first use we made of our liberty was to slip down the quiet back stairs (there were several staircases in that funny old rambling house) and out into the wilderness.

We were so bewildered by the beauty and strangeness of everything there, that we only wandered about hand in hand without trying to talk; and as we were both really tired with our long journey, I took Tim back pretty soon, and directly we had had our tea I unpacked our boxes and put him to bed.

A maid came in soon afterwards, and seemed

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rather shocked at my having done this myself. She had a pleasant rosy face, and I liked her friendly but respectful manner. She told me she was under-housemaid, but that she was to act as our special maid during our visit. She had just come to ask if she could do anything for me, and seemed quite grieved that I should have partly unpacked and have put Master Timothy to bed myself. I felt quite amused at so much solicitude, and told Phœbe that I was always accustomed to do a great deal for my little brother, because there were so many of us at home. And whilst she unpacked and helped to arrange the drawers, I told her a good deal about my home, because it was pleasant to talk about the things I cared for to someone; and Phœbe seemed quite to like hearing it all, and was so kind and helpful and good-natured that I felt much less lonely than I had expected to do the first night. And when she actually insisted on brushing out my hair for me at night, and helping me as a real lady's-maid would have done, I could hardly help laughing, it seemed so funny.

"I'm not used to being waited on, Phœbe," I said. "At home I have often to be nurse and lady's-maid, and housemaid too sometimes. We are such a houseful, you see; and we have not a great many servants—only three."

"Well, miss, then it's all the more reason

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you should be waited on now," responded Phœbe readily; "more especially as you've been ill, like. And for my part I'm very glad to wait on you; for I like a bit of talk, if I may make bold to say so, especially if it's to a young lady. It is a bit dull for a girl in this house. They're very good to me, but any house is dull where nobody young ever sets foot inside it."

"Is it? Yes, I daresay. It seems so funny to me to be anywhere where there are not lots of children. Are there no boys and girls in any of the other houses, Phœbe? Will there be any children for us to get friends with whilst we are here?"

Phœbe shook her head.

"Not any in the village, miss; there's no houses near but the rectory and the doctor's, and there are no young folks there. That's the worst of Lingmouth; there are so few houses. If you drive now, you can get to plenty; but they're all three or four miles away. There's no sociable dropping-in, like, here. I'm afraid you'll find it dull, miss."

"But isn't there an old house nearer than that? An old house that's partly in ruins. Does nobody live there?"

I was looking at Phœbe's face reflected in the glass as I asked this question, and to my surprise I saw a sudden look of terror cross it.

"Oh no, miss; no one lives there," she answered

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quickly, adding under her breath, "I shouldn't think they'd wish."

"Why not?" I asked curiously. "I should think it would be a nice house to live in."

"Well, miss, no doubt its been a fine place in its day, but its been empty this dozen years and more, except for the old woman who takes care of it. And houses that stand empty long get a bad name sometimes, you know."

"What is a bad name?" I asked, rather fascinated by the subject, and made curious by the girl's manner.

"Well, miss," answered Phœbe in a low tone, quite as anxious to speak as I was to listen—"don't say as I told you, please; for Miss Talbot she do say it's all ridiculous nonsense, and won't hear a word on it—folks do say that its got a bad name because it's haunted, and some people declare as they've seen the ghost!"

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CHAPTER III.

MAKING FRIENDS.

FOR a good many days after our arrival at our grandmother's, Tim and I never thought of wandering beyond the limits of the garden. We were so delighted with the wonders and the treasures of the wilderness, that it seemed as if it would furnish us with enjoyment and occupation for ever. The flowers were a perfect sight to see, starring the turf and peeping out from tree-roots and mossy banks with a luxuriance of which we had never dreamed before; and every day new wonders were unfolded to us—buds on the underwood seemed visibly to swell and burst, the wild cherry-trees that grew in this secluded place began to look as if a snowstorm had burst upon them in the night, and the young larches were covered with the sweetest little tiny tassels of bright pale green. We did not know the names of many of the trees or flowers, but we used to ask Aunt Tabitha whenever she visited us in our favourite haunt. At first I think she came to see that we were not getting into mischief, or sitting

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on the damp grass; but when she found that it was no pleasure to us to break, or tear, or destroy, and that even the wild flowers were left for the most part to bloom in their serene happiness, and that we never sat down except in the little old summer-house that, to our great delight, had been given over to us as a supplementary play-room, then I think she began to take us somewhat into favour; and though she answered our questions rather sharply, and seemed amazed at our ignorance of common natural objects, yet she lingered oftener to tell us more, and seemed pleased that we took such an interest in plants and flowers.

Yet it was some time before she offered to let us go into the flower-garden, or took us to see her precious plants in greenhouse or conservatory; but for the present we were quite content with our wilderness, and wished for no wider field.

Who shall describe the triumph and breathless delight attending the discovery of our first bird's nest! It was a thrush's nest, and was built amid some thick ivy clustering round an old oak. I was tall enough to look right in, and Tim could do so when I lifted him up. How pretty and soft and neat it was! And when the eggs began to appear one by one in it, our delight knew no bounds. When the hen-bird began to sit we used to steal up two or three times a day to peep at her, and she grew so used to us that she showed

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no anxiety at all at our approach. We brought her food every day, and when the four little unfledged yellow-beaked thrushes were hatched, we watched their progress from day to day with a quite maternal interest. We had, by that time, several nests on our visiting list, and several young families greatly beloved; but our first nest always held us most in thrall—it seemed to have a charm beyond that of any of the others.

The idea of "taking nests," of tearing them down and carrying them off in wantonness or mischief, never so much as entered our heads. We should have been horrified had such an idea been suggested. I think that this was another point in our favour with grave Aunt Tabitha. She could not endure idle mischief or careless cruelty; and she took an interest herself in the birds' nests we found, and told us a good deal about the habits of our feathered favourites, and could always tell at a glance to what kind of bird a new nest belonged, which seemed very clever and mysterious to us. Sometimes we found birds' eggs on the ground; and those we took home with us, as Aunt Tabitha said they were no use to the birds then. She could always tell us what kind of bird had laid it; and she taught us how to prick and blow them, and gradually we got quite a nice little collection of blue, and green, and speckled treasures.

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I am running rather ahead of my story, however, in saying all this now. I had perhaps better go back and pick up the thread where I dropped it.

For the first few days we were left very much to ourselves at grandmother's, and as the weather was mild and warm we spent most of our time out of doors. We came in at nine o'clock to prayers, and at one o'clock to early dinner, and then at half-past six Phœbe helped me to "dress," and I went in to dinner in a muslin frock with short sleeves, and my sash and coral necklace on, and felt very much dressed-up till I got used to the simple ceremony of late dinner.

I think my manners gave satisfaction. I never spoke unless I was spoken to (less, however, from principle than because I really could not think of anything to say), and as mother was always very particular about deportment at table I was in no danger of disgracing myself or her. Grandmother used to look at me a great deal, or I fancied she did; and one day, it was, I think, about the tenth evening I had dined with them like this, she said suddenly:

"My dear, did your mother ever tell you how like you are to your Aunt Dinah?"

I answered "No, I thought not," whereupon grandmother turned to my aunt and asked:

"Surely you have observed it, Tabitha?"

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"Oh yes; but it is much more marked now than when she came. Dinah always had a bright colour; the child has looked much more like her since she began to get some roses."

And then Tim stole quietly in for his share of the dessert, and the conversation dropped. But when I was in the drawing-room later on, for I always spent half an hour there before going to bed, grandmother spoke to me again:

"Dinah, my dear, are you fond of needlework?"

"Yes, grandmother."

"And are you fond of books? Can you read aloud nicely?"

"I like reading very much. I read to mother often when she has not time to read to herself. I can read whilst I knit the boys' stockings, and she does her mending or making."

"Your mother must be a busy woman, Dinah?"

"Yes, indeed, grandmother. You see, there are seven of us, and everything is made at home except some of the two elder boys' clothes."

"And you help her, do you?"

"Oh yes; only since I have been ill I have been able to do so little."

"Would you like to do more now?"

"Yes, indeed, if only I could."

"I do not see at all why you should not. I do not approve of too much idleness for big people,

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or little people either. You can knit stockings and make shirts as well here as at home. Suppose I supply the materials, do you think you could cut out and make a set of shirts for your father and each of your brothers, and knit them a supply of warm stockings for next winter?"

My eyes brightened at the prospect. Fancy going home to mother laden with piles of these homely but much-needed garments!

"Oh, grandmother, how kind you are! Yes, indeed, I could do it if I had the things."

"But it would take up a great deal of your spare time."

"Oh, but that doesn't matter in the least. I don't want so much time. I would much, *much* rather be working for mother than do nothing but play all day."

"Very good, Dinah, very good," answered grandmother approvingly. "Then we will set to work in good earnest, and I will work with you. Come to my parlour at ten o'clock every day, and we will work there together till half-past twelve. We shall have a book always going, and we shall read in turns. I can knit and read as well as you, so one of us will have the book and a stocking, whilst the other does the sewing, that wants eyesight. In that way your education will not be entirely neglected during the time you are with us, and we ought to get through a very

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good share of work. Shall you like that plan, Dinah?"

I assured grandmother that I should, and sealed my words with a warm kiss.

"And what will Tim do all the time we are reading and working?" asked grandmother.

"Oh, Tim is always quiet and good. He will stay upstairs or amuse himself in the garden if he is told; but if we read history, I think he would like to come in and listen. He loves history, and he would be as quiet as a mouse."

"Well, he can please himself," said grandmother with unwonted indulgence; and after that evening a new *régime* was instituted for us.

The mornings spent with grandmother did not prove in the least irksome to me. I was used to sitting long at my needle, and I was fond of sewing; and two hours and a half passed very quickly when an interesting book was being read, made more interesting by grandmother's comments and explanations; and I had had more than an hour's enjoyment in the wilderness first, and all the afternoon was my own to do as I pleased with. I was delighted to work for mother a part of each day, and the way in which the work flew beneath our busy fingers was a thing to rejoice in. Grandmother taught me a great deal as we sat together in her quiet parlour, and I had that pleasant feeling of learning and getting

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a wider grasp of different subjects that is the real test of thorough education.

At first Tim often crept in to sit on the floor at my feet and listen to what was read or spoken; but as days went by his attendance became more irregular, and some days he never appeared at all.

"I think he is with your Aunt Tabitha," said grandmother as I was folding up my work at half-past twelve one day, and had remarked upon his absence. "She is very busy just now with her plants, potting and watering and tending them. She likes to do a great deal of the real work herself. I daresay you will find your brother with her."

And sure enough, when I reached the potting-shed, there was Tim seated upon an inverted basket, solemnly handing up to Aunt Tabitha as she wanted them the flower-pots he had previously "crocked" as he called it, which means that he had put in the bits of broken crock necessary to ensure sufficient drainage.

He was asking questions of Aunt Tabitha in the solemn way I knew so well.

"Suppose a worm got into the pot, what would happen then?"

"I should turn it out double quick."

"But suppose you didn't see? Suppose it got in through the hole at the bottom?"

"Well, I should soon find out."

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"How?"

"It would disturb the roots of the plant, and the leaves would hang down and look unhappy. When you've watched me longer than you have done yet, you'll often see me turn out a plant from its pot and throw out a worm from the roots."

"But suppose you couldn't find the worm?"

"But I always can."

"But suppose you couldn't, and the worm got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger?"

"Why, then the plant would die."

"And what would the worm do then?"

"I don't know and I don't care."

"But suppose—"

Afraid Aunt Tabitha's patience would give way, I stepped forward and carried off Tim. When he once got into the way of supposing, there was no end to it. That worm would grow as big as the sea-serpent before Tim had done with him, and the number of hypothetical cases to be disposed of before that consummation was arrived at was fearful to contemplate.

"Don't tease Aunt Tabitha with so many questions about nothing, Tim," I advised as I led him off. "You can always ask me afterwards."

"But you don't know things about flowers," was Tim's reply. And it seemed to me that he must pretty well spend his whole morning in

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cross-questioning our horticultural aunt, for the very next time I had to go in search of Tim I found him in the identical spot upon the inverted basket by the potting-bench, and heard his voice deliberately asking:

"Suppose you were to pot a bulb upside down, what would happen then?"

The answer was inaudible, but the pertinaceous questioner returned to the charge.

"But suppose it did, and suppose it grew its nose out of the hole at the other end, what would happen then?"

"You'd better grow your nose out of a hole and see," was the encouraging reply.

Tim rubbed his nose reflectively, and perfectly undaunted returned to the charge.

"Suppose I *did* grow my nose in a flower-pot, what would happen then?"

"You'd better try and see."

"Would it come up noses, or would it come up flowers?"

"You'll know best when you try."

"But suppose—"

"But suppose you hold your tongue and run away and wash your hands for dinner. Here's Dinah coming to fetch you, and you'll have mustard and cress coming up in your finger-nails if you don't keep them cleaner than they are now."

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But Aunt Tabitha's voice did not sound at all cross, and after that I minded less when Tim's voice was heard in the distance suggesting problems and appealing to her for the solution. He spent most of the morning hours in her company, and in their peculiar fashion they seemed to be great friends. She gave him a piece of ground for his own, and said he might choose what he liked to put in it; and by degrees it began to present a curious and variegated appearance. When the seed-beds in the kitchen-garden were being thinned out, he would beg a mass of carrot or turnip or a handful of young greens, and make rounds and squares with them, in which he would place a choice garden flower, such as a geranium or heliotrope. (I am again going on rather fast, but it is so difficult to keep unbroken chronological order when one has to talk of garden things). He made a border of flint stones and ferns, and put some wild flowers with them; and when he was given seeds to sow he first mixed them all together, and then scattered them broadcast over his parterre.

"I like things to come up natural," he explained when I remonstrated with him a little. Aunt Tabitha never interfered with his eccentric plans.

"It is his own garden, let him do as he likes. There is no teacher like experience," she said.

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But these simple and homely pleasures did not satisfy us entirely, and as we grew more used to our new surroundings and our physical strength increased, so also did the love of adventure that was an integral part of the nature of us both.

One day about the middle of April Tim rushed up to me as I emerged from grandmother's parlour, with a face full of importance and delight. He did not speak till we had reached the shelter of our own rooms, and then he began in a mysterious whisper:

"Dinah, I've seen the ruin!"

"Have you, Tim? What is it like?"

"Oh, it's a *lovely* place! We'll go there together very soon. You know, grandmother said we might. I hadn't time to stay; Aunt Tabitha said I mustn't be long. But it's *bootiful*, Dinah! All old gray walls and ivy and tumble-down stairs, and a big old house close by that looks as if anybody might have lived there."

"Did Aunt Tabitha take you there?"

"She took me part of the way. She went to see some poor people who live a good piece on the road. She showed me the house, and said it was the one Cromwell's soldiers had battered about with their horrid disgusting guns; and when she went into the cottages I asked if I might squeeze through the hedge and go and look at the ruins, and she said yes. So I went,

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Dinah; and it was all through a dark wood, with a broad grass road right up to the ruins, and they're lovely. I daresay they've got dungeons, and chapels, and subterranean passages, and everything we want for our games. There's a moat, Aunt Tabitha says; only there's no water in it now, and it's been partly filled up, so that they don't have any drawbridge or portcullis. That seems a pity, doesn't it?" added Tim, pausing and sighing. "I can't think why people who have got nice things don't make the most of them. If *I* had a house with a moat and a drawbridge, I should always keep the moat full of water, and the drawbridge up and the portcullis down; and I should have a horn hanging to a tree on the other side; and then when anybody came they would blow the horn, and the sentinel would ask who it was, and then he'd let down the bridge and pull up the portcullis and let them in. I wouldn't have any back door; I'd make the butcher and baker and everybody have the drawbridge let down for them. Nobody should come to *my* house without blowing the horn and challenging the sentinel. I think I shall be the sentinel myself. I should love to manage the drawbridge and portcullis."

Once launched on a theme of this kind and Tim's flow of eloquence was not easily checked. I tried to stem the tide by asking more about

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the house. I remembered what Phœbe had said about a ghost; and of course such an idea was half fascinating, half terrifying, but on the whole more of a delight than a fear. I resolved, however, not to mention the subject of the ghost to Tim, partly because he was too imaginative to be trifled with, partly because he might talk about it downstairs and get Phœbe into trouble with Aunt Tabitha. I did not much believe in ghosts myself, having been brought up in a very practical fashion, but the idea of a little bit of mystery was very captivating. If there were some hidden secret within that strange old house, how very delightful it would be to find it out.

Tim, however, could not tell me much about the main building. He had only given his attention to the ruin. He talked about his visit there at dinner when we went down, and that set grandmother telling us stories of the old house in historic times, when it had been a fine old place, more of a castle than a house, and had made a name in the pages of history.

"Is it empty now?" I asked.

"Well, there is an old servant who takes care of it. It is a pity, for it is still a fine old house. I wish Mr. Ducie would come back and live in it."

"Is that the name of the gentleman it belongs to?"

"Yes; he lived there till about twelve years

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ago, when he went away rather suddenly, and has never come back. He broke up his establishment and closed the house. I think he spends most of his time abroad."

"Has he nobody belonging to him?"

"Not now. His wife died many years ago." Grandmother paused rather abruptly, as if she had been going to add something more but decided not to. We are very observant of such pauses when our suspicions are once stirred. I at once got an idea that there was something odd about Mr. Ducie's past history.

"May I go with Tim to look at the ruins some afternoon?" I asked.

"Yes, if you wish."

"May we play there sometimes if we like to?" I continued, waxing bolder.

"Yes, I see no objection to your doing so. Mr. Ducie is an old friend. I am sure he would have no objection. You must not do any mischief, of course; but, after all, there is not much you could do."

"They are not mischievous children," observed Aunt Tabitha with her grim air of approval. "And they are as safe in the Manor Park as in our garden. Not a soul ever goes near that house. It is particularly safe from intruders," and she smiled a little scornful smile that I noted at once and pondered over.

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It was a great thing, however, to get this ready permission. By the field path that Tim knew the ruins were not much more than half a mile away. The walk was a shady one, too; which was an advantage now that the warm weather was coming. I felt sure we should spend a good deal of our time at the old house. Our first visit was paid the very next afternoon.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE OLD HOUSE.

WE did not squeeze through the hedge as Tim had done on his solitary visit, but made our way to a pair of very big gates in the road, flanked by tall stone pillars on either side. Upon the top of each one sat a stone griffin, with big wings and a great grinning mouth. The lodge that had once stood there was falling to decay. The thatched roof had slipped down in places and gone into dismal holes. The windows were broken, the steps were covered with moss and lichen. It looked as if no one had crossed the threshold for years.

Right in front of us stretched the wide grass-grown avenue that Tim had spoken about. It looked lonely and desolate even in the bright spring sunlight; and at the end we saw a glimpse of the hoary old building, half concealed by the tender young green of the bursting trees. It was only with difficulty that we opened the side gate, which creaked dismally and clanged behind us in a fashion that made us both jump. Even

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the tree-trunks were overgrown with moss and wreathed in ivy. The whole place wore that look of neglect and desolation that is inexpressibly sad, even to the young and careless.

Tim stole his hand into mine as we pursued our way up the grassy road. As we neared the termination of the long avenue we saw the ruin on our right hand, and an opening in the trees gave ready access to it; but though Tim pulled my hand as if to lead me thither, the house itself had more attractions for me.

"Let's walk round it and get to the ruin that way," I said, speaking unconsciously in a whisper, and Tim obeyed submissively, gazing about him with the greatest curiosity.

It was a strange old place, built in the form of a quadrangle, although not very large, and not more than one story high. The avenue led up to a gateway, and under that one passed into a paved courtyard, where grass was growing up between the stones. We saw a horse-block, a pump, and some windows overlooking all; but we did not venture in that day, although the gates were not closed, and looked as if they always stood open. We skirted round the house, glancing at the tangled garden and lawns that were lawns no longer, and emerged at last upon the south front of the house, along which ran a broad gravelled terrace.

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One could see what a nice place it must once have been. Windows, now closely shuttered, opened upon this terrace, and flights of steps led to the garden below. In the garden was a bowling alley between green banks, and there was a sun-dial in a little sunk lawn of its own; and great clumps of rhododendrons and azalias were dotted about, bursting into bloom even now, though their full glory was yet to come.

The house itself looked so sad and desolate that we were glad to turn our eyes away towards the sunny garden; but even there the sadness still seemed to linger, and as we stood looking down upon it Tim heaved a great sigh.

"I can't *think* how people who have a beautiful romantic house like this can go away and not live in it. I think the queen ought to make a law that if they don't want them themselves they shall give them to other people who do—people who would *appreciate* them, you know!"

"Only if anyone was living here, we couldn't come and play in the ruin."

"Unless we were living there ourselves," was Tim's bold response. "He might give *us* his house if he doesn't want it himself."

"We can pretend it's ours at anyrate," I suggested, and that word was quite enough to set Tim off. From that moment we became the

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practical possessors of the estate, masters of all we surveyed. Of the games we played, of the battles we fought, and the historical scenes we enacted over and over again in this delightful place, I need give no account here. We read up history with unexampled diligence so as to have more scenes to set; we acted trials, imprisonments, almost executions; peopled house and ruin alike with historical characters and the offspring of our imagination, and often found it hard to believe that we were not living ourselves in stirring historic times. Perhaps I was rather big to play such games with so much zest, but I think I enjoyed them quite as much as Tim. It seemed a dull uninteresting thing to be nobody but Dinah Meredith a country doctor's daughter, but when I seemed to interweave with my own commonplace life the spirit-stirring adventures of Henrietta Maria, Amy Robsart, Flora Macdonald, Lady Jane Grey, and half a dozen other heroines equally romantic and unfortunate, then things looked altogether more interesting and brilliant; and I wondered how I really should have acted had I been in the place of the characters I represented. I *felt* as if no emergency would have daunted, no danger cowed me. It seemed almost a pity that one was never tried in these days, that there never was a chance for a girl to show the metal of which she was made.

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By this time I had pretty well forgotten Phœbe's words about the ghost that haunted the house. We had never heard a sound from the silent pile, or seen a sign of human habitation. I even forgot that there was anyone in charge of the deserted mansion, and I often felt a great longing to find some way of effecting an entrance, so that we might wander about the dim corridors and galleries, and people them better than we could do now with the *dramatis personæ* of our imaginary troop.

The ruin was delightful, and quite contented Tim; but the house attracted me the most, and I would have given much for the permission to enter. We used to wander hand in hand about the garden, and steal more timidly under the gateway, into the paved courtyard where the horse-block stood. When we played through the tragedy of Lady Jane Grey's life this block became one for grimmer purposes, and Tim would stand waiting for me, leaning on a stick which he called an axe, and beg my forgiveness for what his duty obliged him to do. But we did not play many games in the courtyard; it was too dark and dreary, and too much overlooked by rows of narrow windows. Both of us at different times fancied we saw a pair of dark wistful eyes, set in a pale sad young face, gazing at us out of an upper window, and both were half charmed at

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the life-like fancy. Luckily, Tim did not give the matter a second thought after the momentary scare had passed; but I knew that just the same odd fancy had come to me one day whilst we were at play there, and though the vision had vanished in a second I was haunted for some time by the dark liquid eyes of the unseen watcher. I said again and again that of course it was all fancy; but I could not help thinking of Phœbe's words about a ghost, and I sometimes shivered a little as we played near the old house, particularly if our steps wandered in the direction of the courtyard.

But before long a new experience was to be ours, and one that gave us the much-desired *entrée* into the old house itself.

We were playing quietly in the ruin one afternoon, as we had done many times before, when a sudden heavy rain-storm burst over us and threatened to wet us through and through. There was no very good shelter to be obtained in the ruin, but not far away was a side door into the house itself, set sufficiently deep in the wall to make a capital place of protection. Taking Tim's hand in mine, I made a rush for the hiding-place, and we gained it just before the rain began to pour down in torrents.

The wind had risen, and sighed mournfully in the tree-tops; the sun was quite obscured, and the

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sky seemed to be pouring down water in buckets-full. Tim was a little nervous, and held my hand tight.

"Suppose it were to go on raining like this for days and days and days, how should we get home?"

"Oh, but it won't, Tim, It's only a storm. It will soon pass."

"Suppose it didn't; suppose it went on for forty days, like it did at the flood, what would happen then?"

"We should be drowned, I suppose; but it won't do that, Tim. You know there is never going to be another Flood any more."

"But suppose—"

There Tim stopped dead short, and glanced up at me with a swift startled glance. His quick ears had caught a sound that now became audible to mine. The sound was that of footsteps approaching the door from the other side. They sounded hollow and mysterious. Tim clutched my hand as tight as he could, and I am certain if it had not been raining in such torrents I should have darted out into the open.

As it was, however, I stood still and tried to disguise my fears from Tim; but my heart beat so hard that I thought he must hear it, and my lips felt dry and parched. I forgot all my fine aspirations after danger and adventure, and for a

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moment I heartily wished myself back in my grandmother's quiet parlour.

The slow heavy steps approached nearer and nearer. There was the grating sound caused by the drawing of bolts, and then with a dismal creak the door opened inwards. Tim shrank back as it did so, and though I stood my ground I shook in my shoes. I saw first a vision of a black vault-like interior, and then the apparition of an elderly woman, with black eyes and a brown wrinkled face, who looked out at us as if half startled at such close proximity, yet not as if our presence was an entire surprise.

"Oh ay, you're there, are ye?" she said in a clear but not unpleasing voice. "I thought maybe ye'd be in the ruins to-day. Ye'd better step in out of the wet. The storm will happen last an hour, and it's ill standing waiting in a chill corner like that. Come in, come in; I'll not hurt ye. Ye've no cause to be afeared."

I suppose she added these words because we did not move at first, and because Tim still looked so wonderingly at her; perhaps I looked frightened too, certainly I was a little startled. But as the woman ended she smiled a very pleasant kindly smile, and at that I took courage.

"I should like to come in. It isn't very warm now the sun has gone in. I wonder if grandmother would say we might."

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"Mrs. Talbot? Ay, to be sure she would. Many's the time she has been in the house herself. She's one of the master's oldest friends. Ye needn't fear but what she'd say as I do."

Fear was abating, and curiosity and pleasure were coming to the fore. I remembered now that Aunt Tabitha had spoken of the old caretaker as a very superior person, and I thought we might safely accept the invitation so hospitably tendered.

"Thank you," I answered; "we shall be very glad to come in. I suppose it is you who take care of the house?"

"Yes," she answered, leading the way down the long dim flagged passage. "I look after the old place a bit. Truman's my name—Dame Truman the young folks used to call me, when there was young folks in the old house. Eh, but that was a long time agone! Seems to me as if things would never come right without we got young things about the place again. Ah me! ah me!" and a heavy sigh followed these words, which had been only partially heard and not at all understood.

Our conductress led us through the dark passage, and past a good many doors, and ushered us finally into a large cheerful kitchen, in which a bright fire was blazing. After the chill of the outside tempest and the cold stone passages the

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ruddy warmth of this fire was very pleasant. Tim and I drew near to the hearth, and stood looking about at the curious room in which we found ourselves.

The kitchen was rather a fine old place. It had a vaulted ceiling and oak rafters black with age. The windows were of the kind that Tim and I characterized as "mediæval;" and as Dame Truman lived almost entirely in her kitchen, she had made it more comfortable and home-like than such places generally are. There was a rocking-chair on one side of the hearth, comfortably padded with faded cushions, and an old oak settle, also cushioned, in a recess opposite. There were crimson curtains to the window, and another across the scullery door to shut off the draught. There was a table beneath the window with a cloth upon it, and some flowers in pots and some books in a little rack. Strips of carpet upon the floor added greatly to the cosiness of the apartment. We looked round it with pleasure and curiosity. I thought it very kind of Dame Truman to bring us in out of the wind and rain. I said as much, and asked how she knew we were there.

"I guessed ye might be, I didn't know for certain. I often see ye playing there."

"I've never seen you."

"Nay, like enough ye haven't; but the old

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house has many a window. I often see you at your games."

I glanced at the dame, wondering if it might not perhaps have been her face and bright black eyes of which I still fancied I had obtained a passing glimpse from the windows overlooking the courtyard. Most likely they were, and it had been my imagination that had endowed them with that sort of indescribable haunting wistfulness which I fancied them to possess—and yet—and yet—

"Do you live all alone in this big old house?" I asked.

"It seems dull no doubt to the likes of you, does it not? But it's been my home so many, many years, I never think of that. I should be lost anywhere else, I think; and I've got used to the loneliness now."

"I suppose it's a very beautiful house? It seems a pity no one lives in it."

"Ay, so it do, Miss Dinah, so it do."

"How did you know my name?"

"Oh, I'm not so shut up here but what I hear a deal that goes on. I get to church now and again too, though I bean't much of a walker at my age; and folks come in for a chat with me times and again. I knew your mother, Miss Dinah, and the aunt who died whom you favour so much. I've been in the service of the Ducies

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ever since I was a slip of a girl, and now I be turned seventy; and the Ducies and the Talbots were aye good friends."

"And will Mr. Ducie ever come back and live here?"

A troubled look crossed the woman's face.

"I trust so, I trust so," she answered earnestly; and somehow I did not like to ask her any more questions.

"Suppose he did come back to live, what would happen then?"

Of course this question came from Tim, cast in his favourite mould. Another strange look came over the old woman's face as she listened.

"Why, then, I suppose things would be as they was before, and the old house would be like itself again."

"I should like to see the old house," said Tim. I had greatly longed myself to make some such suggestion, but had not found courage to come to the point. I looked half apprehensively at Dame Truman as Tim spoke. She seemed, however, in no wise disturbed.

"Should you, little man? Well, then, you may. Many's the time I've thought to ask if ye'd like to play inside the old house; but you seemed so happy out there, I didn't like to disturb ye. You won't get into mischief, Miss Dinah. Nay, I'm sure you won't. So go your ways and do as you

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like. There's nought in the old place to hurt ye; and ye'll hurt nought, I'll be bound."

This prospect of perfect liberty to range where we would and do what we liked was entrancing. I could hardly believe my ears.

"May we go anywhere we like?"

"Oh ay, anywhere you please that you can get. Mayhaps ye'll find a few locked doors here and there, but you needn't take no account of them. There's nothing to scare or to hurt; though folks, they tell me, do talk a deal of rubbish about the old house now and again."

So hand in hand Tim and I began a long enchanting ramble, which was the commencement of a new era in our lives.

What is that indefinable charm compounded of delight, fear, and admiration that gives such an indescribable fascination to any old deserted house to the eyes and the minds of children?

With bated breath and beating hearts, yet with an intense enchantment and awe, Tim and I performed our first voyage of discovery about the intricacies of that quaint old house. We stole up wide staircases and down little winding ones; we wandered through long stately saloons and galleries, through which the light only filtered in through the cracks in the long shutters. We found the old banqueting-hall with its long oak tables and benches, its huge fireplace set deep in

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the wall, and its antlered stags' heads and rusting armour decorating the walls. We found our way up the little narrow stairway into the minstrels' gallery, and from thence we wandered into many quaint bed-chambers; some with panelled, some with tapestried walls, some furnished with canopied beds and ponderous chairs and presses, some quite bare and empty, or full of old chests and accumulations of lumber.

Then again on the upper floor was the long picture gallery, which was also the ball-room, and near at hand were more bed-chambers, furnished in a far more modern and commodious fashion.

These, however, attracted us far less than the older part of the house. I suppose if we had had to live there we might have felt differently, but for our games there was no question as to which were preferable.

We did not, however, attempt to play any games to-day; we were far too much engrossed in our delightful task of exploration. It was some time before we came upon any locked doors, but at last our steps were stayed by one. And this surprised us somewhat, as it was such a very ordinary-looking door that barred our progress —a door of common red baize, with one of those modern contrivances for ensuring its always being kept shut; and it was not the entrance to a

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room merely, but to a gallery or passage of some sort.

Locked, however, it certainly was; and as its modern appearance had not excited our curiosity we retraced our steps, and presently descended once more to the kitchen, which we found after some little search. The sun was shining out by this time, and we felt we ought to be going. We thanked Dame Truman for her hospitality and for the pleasure she had given us, and Tim boldly asked if we might come again.

"Oh ay! oh ay! As often as you like. It won't hurt the old place to be played in; and maybe it will give you pleasure yourselves. This door here is always open by day," showing us one, the outside of which was familiar to us, which opened into a passage very near to the kitchen. "Ye can come in any time you like, whether I'm here or no to let ye in. It does my heart good to hear signs of life about the place. Come as often as ye will—the oftener the better."

So we went home in a state of extreme though quiet elation, and had no difficulty in obtaining the leave of our relatives to accept Dame Truman's invitation. "If we liked playing about in an empty house there could be no possible objection so long as we got into no mischief there," Aunt Tabitha said, with the air of one who mentally adds that there is no accounting for taste.

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Grandmother seemed to understand our pleasure better than Aunt Tabitha, and liked to hear Tim's descriptions of the house she had once known and been fond of, and to answer questions in greater detail as to its history in the past.

We went there now almost every fine afternoon when we were not wanted elsewhere, and gradually the old house grew familiar, though it lost none of its fascination through its familarity. It was when the topography of the rambling old building had become plain to my mind that I made a discovery that gave me food for thought. We had discovered in due course a second locked door, a door of massive oak this time that looked as if it had stood in its place for centuries. This door, too, was one that gave ingress or egress to a gallery rather than a room, and as I became familiar with the house I clearly saw that these two locked doors commanded either end of the same gallery; and further examination and consideration proved also that within these locked doors was a row of windows looking down into the courtyard, and that it was at one of these windows that the face had appeared, or seemed to appear, which had at different times startled both Tim and me.

This discovery I did not communicate to Tim, and he was too young and too dreamy to make it out for himself; but I thought about it a good

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deal myself, recalling what I had heard about this being a haunted house, and wondering if it could be possible that some secret was shut up in these closed rooms. I was young and imaginative enough to indulge the wildest speculations. Nothing is too extravagant to seem possible to youth.

What struck me as much as anything was Dame Truman's determined reticence upon the subject. She never dropped a word or a hint to arouse suspicion or curiosity. She was most careful and guarded in everything she said, and sometimes it was difficult to suppose that she was concealing anything. Yet I could not help noticing that whenever we asked any question about the locked doors and shut-up rooms, she turned it off without giving any direct answer, yet so cleverly as to give us no excuse for returning to the charge; generally, indeed, starting some problem that led to one of Tim's endless string of "supposes," and diverted his mind, if not mine, from the original subject.

I do not doubt that if Tim had realized as I did the relative position of these doors, and knew that several rooms must be thus shut off from us in so mysterious a fashion, he would have been a great deal more persistent than I felt able to be in asking questions and pressing for an answer. But I never told him, because I did not

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wish him to grow imbued with my faint ghostly terrors, nor did I wish him to prove troublesome to kind Dame Truman. Though young enough to indulge in wild flights of imagination, I was old enough to know that grown-up people often had secrets of their own to keep, and that it was neither well-judged or well-mannered on the part of boys or girls to tease them to speak when they judged it well to be silent. I felt it would be a bad way of repaying Dame Truman for her kindness by showing an intrusive and perhaps an impertinent curiosity about what she wished to keep a secret. And then there was always just the doubt as to whether there was any secret of the kind I pictured in my waking dreams. It was quite likely the carefully locked up rooms contained valuable pictures and relics; silver, perhaps, and jewels stored away there in chests and safes. Very likely Dame Truman had been told not to speak about the treasure to anybody, lest a rumour should get about and a robbery be attempted. In my cooler moments I almost persuaded myself that the secret of the old house was nothing more than this; and had it not been for the vision of that pale face and those mournful eyes at the window, I believe I should have grown convinced of the truth of this theory. As it was, I was always in two minds; and as the

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spell of the old house fell more and upon me, I felt as if the ghostly theory must eventually prove the true one. Some day I would ask Phœbe more about the traditions of that ancient place. Did not every historical house own its time-honoured spectre? Might it not be possible to believe that some rooms were haunted? And if so, of course they would be shut up. Possibly, too; a mandate might be issued that no one was to speak of the ghost. Dame Truman might have had orders to that effect. Yet Aunt Tabitha looked scornful at the very mention of such notions, and Phœbe said distinctly that she declared it all nonsense.

Certainly Aunt Tabitha ought to know best; and yet I could not lay to rest my own uneasy speculations

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CHAPTER V.

SOMETHING MYSTERIOUS.

I WAS a little surprised at the encouragement Tim and I received to go often to the old house, and stay there as long as we liked. I should have expected that Aunt Tabitha at any rate, if not grandmother, would think that such constant visits were foolish and unnecessary and a waste of time; but, on the contrary, they seemed to be pleased for us to spend the greater part of our spare time there, and by and by Tim used to make excursions thither by himself in the mornings when I was busy with my needle, and these excursions were sanctioned by Aunt Tabitha.

It was after one of these solitary expeditions that Tim confided to me a discovery he had made.

"Dinah," he said very solemnly, "you know that red door we can't open? Well, there's something alive behind there."

I was startled, but I did not want Tim to see it.

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"Rats, perhaps," I suggested.

"That's what Dame Truman said when I told her I'd heard steps pattering about; but rats can't sing."

"Tell me what you have heard, Tim," I asked, trembling a little in spite of myself; but I was glad to notice that he wasn't at all afraid. I don't think the idea of a ghost or haunted room had ever entered Tim's head, and I am not sure that it would have frightened him if it had. He was not easily disconcerted. I think if he had met a ghost he would only have begun asking it a long string of questions, each of them beginning with a fresh "suppose."

"Well, I'll tell you," he answered confidentially. "It was the first morning I ever went into the house alone. I didn't make a noise. I was pretending to be Charles the First in Carisbrooke, walking up and down and thinking of all that had happened. Of course he wouldn't have made a noise, or else the guards would have heard. Well, I was close by that red door when I heard a noise behind; it was like steps, rather quick and uneven, pattering about, and there was another funny noise too, a sort of hollow thump—thump—thump—that wasn't like anything else at all. I went downstairs and told Dame Truman, and she came up to listen too; but it was all quiet then, and she said that the rats

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often made a great noise in the old house. I said 'Suppose we go in and look if anyone's got in,' and she said nobody could without her knowing. I said 'Suppose they got up by the ivy and in at a window,' and she said then they'd have to get out the same way as they got in and break their legs perhaps. She wouldn't go in. I think she was afraid; but I told her I would take care of her. I would have got a pike or a halbert from the gun-room if she'd have gone in. I don't think women are at all brave generally, Dinah, unless they're women in books."

I let this hit at our courage pass. As I was feeling rather nervous myself at what I was hearing, I did not feel that it was for me to protest.

"Well, go on," I said. "What happened next?"

"Well, after that I kept pretty near to that door, and I was very quiet. Once or twice afterwards I thought I heard noises, but to-day I heard something quite different. I heard somebody singing."

"Oh, Tim! you must have fancied it."

"No, I didn't. If I'd been going to fancy things I should have fancied them before. I heard somebody singing 'Annie Laurie' as plain as possible."

"Did it sound like a man's voice or a woman's?"

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"A woman's," was the decided answer. "It was right up high as mother sings; and when she'd done singing she whistled the tune all through. Now, I should never have fancied *that;* because, though a distressed damsel shut up in captivity *might* sing, I should never have *expected* her to whistle—I should never have thought of such a thing."

"Did you tell Dame Truman?"

"No. I thought she'd only be frightened again, and I don't want to frighten a poor old lonely woman like her. Besides, she didn't know I was in the house at all. She wasn't in the kitchen when I slipped in, and I thought she'd only think I was fancying if I told her."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"I'm not quite sure. I *thought* I heard the woman talking to somebody by and by: it sounded like talking, only I didn't hear anybody answering, though there were stops as if she was waiting for an answer. But it was twelve o'clock by that time and I had to go. Dame Truman wasn't in the kitchen as I went out, either. She often isn't there in the mornings; and I can't think where she is, for I sometimes hunt for her quite a long time and can't find her. What do you think about it, Dinah?"

I was puzzled what to think. I knew that Tim possessed a vivid imagination, and that his

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mind was well saturated just now with romantic notions of all kinds. I had never heard any strange sounds from that closed wing, though I had been on the alert for a good while, nor had Tim done so, so long as I was with him. It seemed not at all improbable that loneliness had made him imaginative, and the sighing of the wind or something of that sort had been interpreted by him into the sound of a voice. Nevertheless, I could not get rid of the impression that there *was* some sort of a mystery about that old house, and if so, why, anything was possible!

"Suppose there was somebody shut up there," said Tim, his eyes wide with the stress of his own imaginings.

"Oh, but there couldn't be, Tim," I answered, common sense conquering all other vague suspicions for the moment.

"But, suppose there was—people have been shut up in captivity before now—suppose there was somebody there."

"Well, I don't suppose we could do anything."

"But, suppose we found her out. Suppose we got in and said we'd come to save her. What would happen then?"

"I'm sure I don't know. I don't suppose if anybody was there that we should ever find it out."

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"Oh, yes, we should. I shall go as a wandering minstrel next time. I shall sing 'Annie Laurie.' Dinah, if there were any rooms behind that door, should you know where the windows of them would be?"

I knew that very well, having a much clearer grasp of the topography of the building than Tim. I knew that the row of narrow pointed windows looking into the yard were inclosed between the two locked doors, as well as some other windows looking the other way, southward over the park. I fancied that the south windows were those of rooms, whilst the row of smaller ones facing north belonged merely to the gallery or corridor; for, in the wings that flanked the main block, that was the way the house was arranged. The row of narrow pointed windows all round the quadrangle looked into the court. The rooms faced outwards east and west respectively, and the north side of the quadrangle was mainly occupied by its gateway and porters' lodges on either side.

"Yes, I think I know the windows," I answered, and Tim clapped his hands.

"What a good thing!" he cried. "Then I'll be Blondel next time we go. Who will you be, Dinah? I'll sing 'Annie Laurie' under his windows—oh, but he's a her, I'm afraid; never mind, she can *pretend* she's Richard, can't she?

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And what will you be? I don't know what part there is for you?"

"Oh, I can be a conspirator, posted somewhere to give the alarm if anyone sees," I answered. For I thought that if Tim really did try to attract the attention of the imaginary captive, I could conceal myself somewhere in a good place of observation, and try if I could see anything to corroborate our growing suspicions. I did not see how, in these days, anybody *could* be shut up a prisoner in an old house and nobody know it, and yet the idea of a ghost seemed almost more impossible and silly.

Next time we started for the old house, Tim had a large unwieldy bundle under his arm. It did not seem heavy, but was rather unmanageable, and it was wrapped in a piece of old red table-cloth. He would not entrust it to my keeping, though it incommoded his movements a good deal. I asked no questions, knowing his love for a little bit of mystery; but before we had reached our destination I had a very shrewd idea what it was he was carrying, from the hollow semi-musical sounds it emitted when anything struck it. When we reached the precincts of the old house, Tim laid his burden down and solemnly proceeded to dress for his part. He undid his bundle, which proved, as I had guessed, to be an old guitar with a couple of strings, which

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we had seen many times in a garret at home; but there were other things in the bundle besides of a heterogeneous and remarkable character, wherewith Tim promptly commenced to array himself. First he took off his own cap and put on an aged felt soft hat adorned with peacocks' feathers, that fell over his eyes like an extinguisher, and finally had to be adjusted over his cap. He had further adorned this hat behind by the ends of the tails of our grandmother's chestnut horses, which he had fastened in in some mysterious way, probably with Phœbe's assistance, and which now hung down his back in a sort of red mane. He had got an enormous old-fashioned linen collar with an embroidered edge, which he tied round his neck, and the red table-cloth had been cut and manufactured into the caricature of a short cavalier cloak. The guitar was slung on by means of a broad blue ribbon, and Tim was metamorphosed. A smile of satisfaction was on his earnest face, though he sighed as he looked down at his legs.

"I *wanted* James to let me have his top-boots, but he wouldn't. I'm afraid my legs are an *anachronism*,"—where Tim picked up his long words was often a mystery to me—"but I think my top half is about right. Do I look like a mediæval minstrel, Dinah?"

"I should think very," I answered. Somehow I

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never wanted to laugh at Tim, though I suppose he must have looked supremely ridiculous.

"Aunt Tabby thought I did when I showed myself to her, after Phœbe had dressed me for a rehearsal," said Tim, with a smile of artistic pleasure. "I went to her in the garden, and I'm sure she thought I was very like a minstrel, for when she heard somebody coming she told me to run in by the backdoor. I suppose she thought they would be frightened, seeing a mediæval man in the garden with her. Or it might give rise to scandal in a little place like this." Tim often picked up fine phrases he heard other people use, and employed them with the greatest gravity. "Well, where are the windows, Dinah? And where are you going to watch?"

I took him into the courtyard and pointed to those opposite the gate.

"I'm going upstairs into the passage-room over the gateway," I answered. "I shall be able to see then if anybody is approaching from without. You must sing and play loud, Tim, or perhaps she won't hear."

I had decided that Tim should not play beneath the windows of the rooms, as there was no point from which they were overlooked; but if he could tempt the supposed captive to the lobby window, whilst I was carefully concealed in the high gateway chamber opposite, I was almost certain to

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catch a fleeting glimpse, however cautiously the captive might move. Besides, if our suspicions were true, might not the solitary prisoner be glad to show herself? The wonder was that she had not done so before; only perhaps unkindness and harsh captivity had made her afraid and distrustful of everyone.

When I was safely ensconced in my hiding-place, Tim began strutting manfully up and down the yard, twanging the strings of his guitar with great effect; and presently he lifted up his voice and began to sing "Annie Laurie," softly at first, but with increasing body of sound as he gained courage, and grew used to the echoing reverberation of the courtyard.

I suppose I did not really expect anything to happen, or I should hardly have been so startled at what followed. All in a minute as it seemed to me, looking across at the opposite wing, I became aware that I saw right through it. In a minute I understood how this was. A door had been opened in one of the rooms, and a window was revealed to me opposite the door, so that I seemed to look right through the house. Then there *was* somebody shut up in those haunted rooms! My heart beat thick and fast, and I hardly knew whether I was glad or sorry at such a strange discovery. But perhaps it was only Dame Truman. She had never showed us her

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bed-room, nor had we ever came across it in our rambles through the house. Perhaps it was up there, and she had a private way of her own to get to it. After all no doubt it was her hand that had opened the door. No doubt—but then, what was *that*—?

I started violently again in the midst of my reasoning soliloquy; for I had caught sight of a figure gliding past one or two of the lancet windows, and presently I had a vision of a pale face and a pair of dark luminous eyes gazing out of one of the windows, as if fascinated by the sight of Tim. The head was so cautiously raised above the sill that if I had not been on a higher level I should hardly have seen it. It was impossible for Tim to do so, though he looked up at the windows, and twanged manfully at his two strings and sang "Annie Laurie" with untiring energy.

I gazed fascinated at the face, or such part of it as I could see. It was but a glimpse I could obtain. I saw a fair pale skin, a wave of dark soft hair, those same melancholy, luminous eyes whose glance had haunted me so long. I could not see to whom the face belonged, whether to man or woman, grown person or child. I only got an impression of great beauty and great sadness, and a perfect conviction that Tim's idea was correct. Certainly there was *someone* concealed in those

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shut-up rooms, someone that could by no manner of means be connected with Dame Truman. The only question in my mind was, could the apparition be human? It seemed utterly impossible that any real person could be living in seclusion in that old house; and yet, would a ghost—if there were such things as ghosts—care to peep out of windows to watch Tim's antics as he strutted about in the way that seemed to him to represent most tellingly the mediæval minstrel.

Luckily when I joined him he did not ask me any questions. It did not occur to him that I was in a better position for seeing than himself.

"I'm afraid it's no good to-day," he said. "She's either not there, or she won't show herself. But I'll leave my dress and guitar here, and try another day."

So we played our ordinary games that afternoon, and went home early to do a little gardening in Tim's remarkable plot.

"I hope the flowers will come up well," he remarked; "for we could take some then to the captive maiden. I've got some nice carrots and turnips and broccolies for her, but of course flowers are more romantic."

I was glad for Tim to garden that evening, as it always engrossed him very much, and I did not feel as much disposed to talk as usual. He had to go and fetch Aunt Tabitha at last to tell

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him which were the weeds and which the flower-seeds coming up. He did not want me when he had our aunt to converse with, and I do not doubt he gave her an account of our afternoon's masquerading. But of course she would think it all a game together, and I did not feel able to speak yet of what I had seen or fancied. Already I was beginning to doubt the evidence of my senses; yet it was a strange thing if Tim and I both began to picture things in so vivid a fashion.

But I held my peace, for I was not prepared to talk to anybody about what was stirring in my head. Only as I went to bed that night I asked Phœbe if she could tell me anything about the strange old house.

"You said once it was haunted, didn't you, Phœbe? I want to know some more."

Phœbe glanced timidly over her shoulder.

"Miss Talbot says that is all nonsense. She doesn't like it talked about."

"I suppose it is nonsense, and it would be silly to be always talking of it; but if there is a story I should like to hear it. I don't think Aunt Tabitha would mind that."

"Oh no, Miss Dinah, it's talking in the servants' hall she doesn't like—not what a young lady likes to know. But I'm not certain sure as I know the rights of it."

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"Well, tell me what you know. How long has the house been haunted?"

"Why, as for that, it has had its haunted gallery this ever so long. People have talked about *that* ever since anyone can remember. They say it's a lady in long robes as walks up and down wringing her hands as if in trouble. But then she didn't seem to do no manner of harm. She had been there, so folk said, ever since the house was built up again after Cromwell's soldiers had knocked it all down. The family lived there for generations, and did not mind her one bit. But now nobody likes to go near the place—I won't after nightfall."

"Why not?"

"That's just it. It's only this last winter as so many stories have got about. Mr. Ducie left twelve years ago, after his daughter eloped with her cousin, a young soldier, and left him alone. He shut up the house then, and has never been back since; but some folks say he did come back, after his poor young daughter died of grief at his hardness, and that he *couldn't stay.*"

"I don't understand."

"Why, Miss Dinah, it's like this, you see. He was mad with grief and rage when his beautiful daughter—I mind Miss Ducie, she was a lovely young lady—ran away to Scotland to be married. I think he said he'd never forgive her. Any-

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way he shut up his house, and dismissed everybody but Dame Truman and went away abroad. About a year ago we heard his daughter was dead; her husband had died too, and they say her heart was broken because her father wouldn't forgive her. Most folks say that old Mr. Ducie has never set foot again in his house since he first went away; but there are others that tell a different tale."

"And what is that?" I asked shivering a little, I hardly knew why, for it was a warm night in May.

"Well, Miss Dinah, they say that one night last October he suddenly appeared at the old house, as it were in secret, and stayed there two or three nights. Nobody knew anything about it. Nobody went to see him, or knew he was there. Only Dame Truman, and she is as close as the grave. Folks who tell the story say that he came to see if he couldn't live there again; but that he was driven away, and will never be able to come back any more."

"Why not?"

"They say," here Phœbe lowered her voice almost to a whisper,—"they say that it's because the old house is haunted now, not by the old ghost that nobody cared about, but by Miss Geraldine herself, as folks used to call Miss Ducie. They say her father's hardness turned

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her brain, and that now she haunts her old home, and that he can't stand it, and will never come back any more."

"But who says it? Dame Truman?"

"Not she. She never breathes a word. They say 'tis as much as her place is worth to let drop a single word. But there *is* folks as has seen or heard things, and they don't see no reason for keeping their mouth shut; and they have been that scared that nobody cares so much as to pass the gates of the old house after dark."

"Why, what is there to hurt them? We play there all day."

"Yes, and folks wonder your aunt and grandmother let you. But the missus never did take any notice of village gossip, as they call it. They don't believe in anything; but then they've not seen what other folks have."

"But what have people seen?"

"Why, lights in the windows of the haunted gallery that Dame Truman couldn't want, and shadows on the blind that aren't none of her making. And there are those that have heard odd sounds from the matted gallery, when they've been doing a bit of mending to the roof. And doors are kept locked that never used to be locked before. There's one in the village, too, as will take his oath that he saw Miss Geraldine's own face at a window one day at dusk

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—Mrs. Ducie's I should say,—only he could hardly have known it again but for the eyes, it was so pale and shrunk and changed. And that's all I know, Miss Dinah. I've never been nigh the old place for many a year, and don't wish. But there's many as say it isn't canny there. I don't know the rights of it one way or another, and it may be only idle talk; but I can't help fancying there *is* something not right about that old house, though I don't suppose it is anything to hurt, or the mistresses wouldn't be so ready to let you and Master Tim spend your time there."

"No, of course not," I answered. "I expect it is all gossip and silliness. Thank you, though, for telling me the story, Phœbe; it is very interesting. What was the young lady like—Miss Geraldine—did you say she was Mrs. Ducie?"

"Yes, for she married her cousin, Captain Ducie, who'd loved her all his life, though the old man thought they felt like brother and sister and would have no thoughts of wanting to get married. Oh, she was a sweet young lady, she was, with soft dark eyes and wavy brown hair, and the loveliest pale clear skin. She was the very apple of his eye, she was, her poor old father's. He's never been the same since she went away. Folks say it was his death-blow."

"Poor man!" I said, "it seems all very sad;"

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and then I dismissed Phœbe, and tried to settle for the night. But I could not get the strange wild story out of my head. It haunted me all the time I was finishing undressing, and I seemed to see the mournful glance of those dark eyes even after I had got to bed.

I do not know whether I was more nervous or anxious or sceptical; but from some cause or other there was little sleep for me that night.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE SECRET DISCLOSED.

THE next scene in the drama came quickly and unexpectedly, before we had either of us had much time to compare notes or discuss the probability of Tim's theory about the captive maiden.

His garden engrossed him all the following morning whilst I was at work in grandmother's parlour, and when we started off together in the afternoon for the old house, his mind was for the moment more engrossed by thoughts of the "mulching" to which his patch of ground had been subjected than with the supposed victim of some deeply-laid criminal plot. I was glad of this myself, for I was hardly prepared to talk to Tim on the subject, or to share with him my lately-received knowledge. My real desire was to get a quiet half hour with kind old Dame Truman, and put a few practical questions to her. I had often chatted to her in her pleasant kitchen whilst Tim was prosecuting some private search or adventure of his own, and had always

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found her most friendly and easy to get on with. I was not in the least afraid of putting questions to her. My only doubt was as to the best way of framing them.

However, as it happened, I had not to do this. When we reached the house nobody was in the kitchen, and we proceeded at once upstairs. Tim was suggesting the expedience of again donning his "minstrel's disguise," and had run on in advance of me—for it was such a hot day that I felt little disposed to exert myself—when he came rushing back with a face full of mystery and excitement.

"Dinah!" he exclaimed breathlessly, "Dinah! what *do* you think! The red door is open at last! Wide, wide open! Has she escaped?"

I was so astonished I hardly knew what to say.

"Are you sure, Tim?"

"Come and see for yourself."

I followed Tim fast enough then, and soon saw that he was perfectly right. The red door that had always been locked heretofore, stood wide open, and so did the opposite door on the other side. As I anticipated, there was disclosed thus to view a long matted gallery, lighted by a row of pointed windows overlooking the courtyard, whilst to our left, as we stood at the threshold of the gallery, were several doors leading evidently

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into those south rooms I had identified from the other side of the house.

"I'm afraid she has escaped without us," said Tim, burning with curiosity yet half disappointed too. "Let's go and search."

I hesitated a moment; but my curiosity was as great as Tim's, and his fearlessness inspired me. I hardly paused to ask myself if we had any right to intrude within the precincts of this gallery. We had been told that we might go anywhere where no locked doors stood in our path. It seemed to me that if any secret had been shut away between these portals it must have been removed since our last visit. At any rate I did not feel disposed to pause, and my brain was in such a whirl that I was in no condition to argue out the matter calmly.

Tim had already stolen softly down the matted gallery. He was now looking intently through a keyhole; his face flushed suddenly and he beckoned me to come.

"There's someone inside," he whispered excitedly; "I can see a hand and a bit of a book. It's the captive maiden, I do believe. *Shall* I run and put on my minstrel's dress, or don't you think there would be time?"

Tim had got his hand upon the door handle as he spoke, and in his earnestness he must have

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made some noise with it, for next moment a sweet but fretful voice inside the room called out:

"What are you fumbling and jabbering out there for? Come in, can't you?"

At that Tim boldly turned the handle and threw the door wide open.

We saw the interior of a pretty bright room, furnished in quaint picturesque fashion with carved chairs and tables, inlaid cabinets, and curious ornaments of old china and silver. The hangings were of beautiful old damask, and some of the curtains were partially drawn, so that the whole aspect of the room was dim and harmonious. But we had little time then to gaze on accessories, as our eyes were riveted at once upon the one occupant of the room, a boy of perhaps ten or twelve years old, slightly but not painfully deformed, with a very beautiful pale face and a pair of large lustrous dark eyes, filled with an intense, haunting melancholy.

He was picturesquely dressed in deep black, and looked as if he would harmonize admirably with some of Tim's games. But it was only for the first second that we saw the face in its calmness and beauty; the moment the boy saw clearly who had intruded upon him, his countenance became convulsed and almost livid with fury. He sprang from his seat in a perfect tempest of passion.

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"How dare you! how *dare* you!" he shouted, clenching his hands and looking as if he would fly at our throats. "How dare you come here? I'll kill you—I will, I will! I'll kill that old hag for letting you in! She's broken her promise, and you've—you've— Oh! how *dare* you? I'll—" but choked as it seemed by passion, he could say no more, but dashing to the bell-rope he tugged and pulled at it so furiously that it came away in his hand.

Dame Truman could not have been far off, for before the boy had finished speaking she was in the room; and he, speechless with rage, could only point at us, glaring with the fury of a wild animal and gesticulating furiously.

"For shame of yourself, Master Gerald, for shame!" exclaimed the old woman severely. "Do ye think it becomes the honour of the Ducies ye are so fond of talking of to behave more like a wild beast than a human creature? What means all this to-do? Are ye in truth not fit company for your own kind? Sometimes I misdoubt it."

"Take them away! take them away!" screamed the boy wildly. "It's all some infamous plot, and it's of your contriving, you wicked old woman!"

"Nay, Master Gerald, that it's not. Nought has been done here but by your own command."

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"My command! How dare—"

"Yes, your command, Master Gerald. Was it not by your command I bid this young lady and her brother come and play within the house, that you might be amused sometimes in your loneliness by the sight of their play-acting and the sound of their voices? Was it not by your command that they had the run of the house and leave to go anywhere save where doors were locked? Was it not your special wish that no word should be breathed about this particular gallery lest their curiosity should be aroused? The locked doors were your safeguard; yet who summoned me in the middle of the last night to set both those doors wide open, and who bid me very peremptorily not to close them again until I had orders to do so?"

Gerald, if that was the boy's name, had sunk down by this time into a chair; he was trembling all over, but the first gust of passion seemed to have passed.

"It was a stifling night," he muttered. "You must have known I didn't mean them kept open. It's all part and parcel with your infamous plot."

"Plot, lad, plot!" repeated the old woman with both feeling and dignity. "Nay, I've no plot but for thy happiness, and that thou knowest well. Thy welfare and happiness have ever been

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first with me, and I have never crossed thy will in this or any other matter."

Gerald had laid his arms upon the table, and now laid his head down upon them.

"Happiness!" he repeated in a low voice full of something that sounded almost like despair. "You talk of happiness—to me!"

There was silence a moment, which was broken by the sound of Tim's voice:

"If he's playing a game he does it *beautifully;* as well as a grown-up book. Oh, I wish he'd play with us!"

But I knew that it was not play, though I by no means understood what it all meant, and obeying a sign from Dame Truman I took Tim's hand in mine and followed her softly from the room. We went down into the kitchen, and the dame sank down in her chair as if somewhat exhausted. Her first words were rather startling.

"Thank God," she said fervently, "I believe the worst is over now."

"The worst!" I repeated, puzzled by her manner. "Has he been ill?"

"Ill in mind, ill in spirit, poor perverted lad," was the still decidedly perplexing answer. "Nay, Miss Dinah, dear, I cannot tell you all his story, as I have promised secrecy and must not break my word; but never fear, he will tell you him-

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self. I've not had sole care of him all these months without knowing something of the workings of his mind, curious though it be. He has been longing of late to see faces once more, for all he hopes his very existence is a secret; and since you have been about the place he has quite roused up to watch you at your play. Many's the time I know he has longed to see you face to face and to join your play-acting games, which are just to his taste; but what with his pride and waywardness and lonely ways, he never could come to the point. I thought to-day would do it, when I saw him engrossed so in his book that he thought no more about the open doors; yet I am grieved you should have seen him in one of his worst fits of passion, for of late they have much abated, and had I hoped passed away with increase of health and spirit."

I understood a good deal more of this speech than Tim did. I began to piece together different scraps of information I had heard at various times and to draw my own conclusions, but I thought I had better not ask questions yet; so I left the field to Tim, who was always ready.

"Why do you keep him shut up there like a prisoner? Why does he never come out?"

"He is only a prisoner at his own pleasure. It is his whim to keep himself shut up, and he was so ill when he first came—ill rather in mind than

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body—that he was allowed to follow his own fancy. He is well in health now, and if you can tempt him out of doors and get him to join you in your plays it will do him a deal of good, that it will."

"Will he let us see him again? He said he would kill us. He acts beautifully. I wish he would play with us."

"I doubt not but he will and gladly. When the fit of passion is on him he doesn't know what he says or does; but it will be passed by now. I had better go up and see him. If he would like to see you again, would you go up to him?"

"Oh yes," answered Tim readily. "I should like to see him again. I want to know how he does it all so well."

The old woman vanished up an odd little staircase leading from the kitchen, the existence of which was unknown to us. Evidently it communicated in some way with the locked-up wing where Gerald was shut up. I began to realize that this poor boy must be the grandson of the owner of the old house, the son of the daughter who had run away and brought so much sorrow upon him and herself. The connecting links of the story were missing, but the whole situation seemed interesting and romantic, and Gerald's melancholy beauty and strange lonely life, as well as his gusts of passion and

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wayward wildness, all appealed powerfully to my sympathy and imagination, and raised him to the position of a kind of hero.

Dame Truman was not long gone. She came back with a look of contentment on her face.

"He would like to see you again," she said; "and Miss Dinah, dear, if he asks you to promise solemnly never to reveal the 'secret of his existence' as he calls it, poor lad, you need not be afraid to do so. It pleases his poor mind to believe that no living creature in the place but myself knows of it; but it's not such a secret really as he thinks, and there is no need for you to feel bound to tell Mrs. Talbot or your aunt anything he tells you. They know all about him from the master, so you can give Master Gerald your word without fear. Like enough without it he would never make friends at all."

I began now to entertain a shrewd suspicion of the reason we had been sent so frequently to play at the old house. Possibly Gerald had been nearer the mark than he knew, when he had talked about a "plot."

But I said nothing, and we followed our conductress up a narrow stairway and along one or two queer passages that seemed made in the thickness of the wall, till we emerged at last in a comfortable room which was evidently Dame Truman's sleeping apartment, and from thence

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we passed out into the corridor between the two doors once so fast locked.

"You know the way now," said the old woman. "Go in and don't be afraid."

I don't think Tim knew what fear meant, at least not real fear of any concrete object; all the terrors he ever suffered from were purely of an imaginary character. When we entered Gerald's room and found him seated in an easy chair by the window in an attitude of profound dejection, he went straight up and asked him eagerly:

"Oh, *do* tell me how you do it! Who are you now? I know who you'll do for. Strafford—when he knew the king couldn't save him. Shall I be the officer coming in with the death-warrant? We could do the execution in the yard—there's a block, you know; and Dinah will wave her hand out of a window as you pass, and be Archbishop Laud giving you his blessing. We have *such* a nice picture of it in a book at grandmother's. Strafford is so handsome—really very like you, I think."

Gerald's face flushed hotly, but he did not seem at all angry with Tim. His deformity was so slight as to be no disfigurement beyond a slight stoop and rounding of the shoulders, but he was so morbidly sensitive about it, as I heard later, that he magnified it into something unsightly and terrible. I don't think Tim ever

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observed it, and the peculiar beauty of Gerald's face struck him greatly; for we were all ordinary-looking children, without anything that could be called romantic or distinguished in our appearance, and the contrast struck and pleased him.

Gerald would fain have kept his distance, and maintained his melancholy silence and reserve; but Tim was in the thick of a game before he knew what line to adopt, strutting about and putting into his words and actions a good deal of real dramatic power, till the stranger boy could hold out no longer, and having in his solitude acquired a habit of throwing himself into the character of any oppressed or enslaved being of whom he read, was able to take up his part with an ease and skill that brought considerable pleasure with it.

I was old enough to know how good it must be for Gerald to indulge in a game of play with children after his long seclusion, so I aided them all I could, and the boys grew quite excited over their representations. Tim's minstrel dress was brought into requisition, and the Blondel and Richard scene was enacted with great success; and then they tilted in the yard for my benefit at what Tim called a "tournay," and I sat on the horse-block and gave them ribbons to put in their hats, and awarded prizes of flowers to the victor after each encounter. I saw Dame Tru-

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man's face beaming delightedly upon us from time to time from a lower window, and I could see by the colour that had come into Gerald's face that the spirit of the game and the unwonted exercise were doing him great good. He looked a different boy from the one we had seen an hour back, with face convulsed with passion or set in lines of deep dejection. I thought it was little wonder he had grown so strange and wayward, shut up all alone in that lonely old house. I wondered he had been allowed to do so, even at his own wish; but I was content to wait for the solution of the puzzle till he should wish to tell the tale himself.

Presently he got tired of playing games. He was not strong, nor was he accustomed to active ways, and they quickly fatigued him.

"Let us go upstairs again now," he said, "and Truman shall bring us some tea."

"Won't you show us your garden first?" asked Tim.

"I haven't got a garden."

"Not got a garden of your own in this big place! Oh, Gerald! Why, I got Aunt Tabby to give me a garden before I'd been there a fortnight. Why, you might have a *lovely* one here."

"Might I?" said Gerald hesitatingly; "but I don't know if I should care about it."

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"Oh yes, but you would. It's lovely to have a piece of ground of one's own to dig and mulch and collect things for. Some day I'll show you mine, and I know Aunt Tabby will give you some seeds. I'll—"

But here Gerald's face changed suddenly. It seemed for a moment as if he was going to fly into another passion. But in the end he controlled himself, and only adjured us in the most tragic tones to "reveal the secret of his unhappy existence" to no creature at all, under any circumstances whatsoever.

Tim, who loved a secret and a mystery, and who looked upon our discovery of to-day as something strange and untoward, promised with an eager good-faith that appeased Gerald instantly, and I too was quite ready to give him the assurance he desired, and the momentary cloud passed quite away. He evidently believed that we were in entire ignorance of his true name and history and antecedents; and so, of course, Tim was. I knew a little, and guessed a good deal more than I knew; but I was cautious enough to keep my knowledge to myself, and let him indulge the idea that we knew nothing but what he chose to tell us.

He and Tim passed under the archway and turned into the garden, in search of a spot suitable in the eyes of the latter for the purpose

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of a garden. I was despatched to ask Dame Truman if she thought we might have tea out of doors, and great was the good woman's delight at the suggestion.

"It does my heart good to think of his playing the child once more, poor lad. If once he will take to going out he will be certain to pick up. It can't be good for anybody to stay mewed up ever between walls. Yet it's been ever a job to get him to stir out even when he was well enough to do so. Even these warm spring days hardly tempt him to leave his books. I always said if he could once get young companions it would be the saving of him, and so I believe it will."

That was the beginning of our friendship with the strange boy Gerald; but it was a friendship that was destined to develop in a curious kind of way, and to lead to results little dreamed of at the time. There was something rather fascinating in the strangeness and secrecy of it all, and Tim was greatly excited and delighted in his dreamy romantic fashion.

He went more assiduously than ever to the old house. He had infected Gerald with some of his own enthusiasm about his garden, and I believe that a good many of the morning hours were passed by those two in digging and delving at a tempting-looking border which had long been neglected, removing weeds and getting it into

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order for the seeds and plants that Tim had given him for the purpose. He and Gerald had compromised matters thus—Tim was to inform Aunt Tabitha that he had another garden at the old house, and to ask her if she could spare him any seeds or odd plants for that; and this appeal had been responded to with wonderful liberality. Aunt Tabitha's own garden was by this time "planted out," and she had many geraniums, verbenas, calceolarias, and heliotropes to spare, which were duly made over to Tim. It was getting late for sowing seeds, he was told, so more plants were given him instead; and as he had gained a certain amount of wisdom by experience, and had had the benefit of watching the gardeners at grandmother's "bed out" under Aunt Tabitha's eagle eye, he had a very fair notion how to go about to produce a symmetrical effect, and Gerald's garden at the old house was much more brilliant if less original than his own parterre at home.

Gerald, from having been so long a prisoner, with so little to vary the monotony of his life, entered with great eagerness and zest into any of the many games proposed by Tim, as well as into the garden project. He was really fond of flowers, and he watered and tended these plants of his with great assiduity. He was a curious, wayward boy, and sometimes would not even see

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me when I came in the afternoon, but I do not think he ever denied himself to Tim; and there were moments when he seemed to try to atone for his past discourtesy by a greater show of courtesy or confidence afterwards.

As I grew to know Gerald better, I became more struck by his curious complex character. He had never yet told us his "history" as he called it, though he promised from time to time to do so at some future opportunity. But even without knowing this I was struck sometimes by several odd inconsistencies in his character; and even more by the fact that he did not seem in the least aware of these inconsistencies himself.

One day, when in his most expansive mood, he took me into a little inner room that I had never seen before, and which was certainly quite unlike anything I had ever seen anywhere else. It was fitted up as he told me for an "oratory." There was a little table in the window covered with a velvet cloth, upon which lay a Bible and a prayer-book and several books of devotion, all beautifully bound, with rich markers to keep the places. There was a velvet-covered kneeling-stool beside this table, and a chair at one side, and on the wall hung many beautiful prints of various sacred subjects.

"This is my sanctum, where I come to meditate and pray, when my grief seems too heavy to be

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borne," he said in that rather grandiloquent way which he was fond of assuming at times.

As Gerald would never come to church, and grew angry if pressed to do so, and as he professed a horror almost amounting to detestation for the whole of the human race with one or two exceptions, whilst the name of his grandfather was never to be mentioned in his hearing for fear of evoking another of these wild outbursts of passion, I was hardly prepared for any confession of religious fervour or devotion. But I had learned by this time to take quietly anything he might say or do, and I expressed no surprise, only as I looked at the lovely view from the window I said:

"This must be a nice place to say one's prayers in."

"Yes," he answered; "sometimes the only happy moments in the day are spent here."

Tim, who had stolen in after us, looked up in his face now and asked:

"Are you religious, Gerald?"

"Yes," answered the boy with a strange kind of complacency, "very religious. Religion is the only thing that never fails one."

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CHAPTER VII.

GERALD'S STORY.

GERALD was very observant, and very quick to feel anything like criticism of his conduct, even if unexpressed. I think he saw that his profession of religious fervour had raised a question in my mind as to its sincerity, for the very next day he received us in a sort of solemn state, and told us the story of his past in the words in which I shall try to tell it here.

Let me say at once, though, that I believe Gerald was quite sincere in one sense of the word, in saying that he was religious and found comfort in prayer and meditation. As we grow older we find that strange inconsistencies exist even amongst those far older and wiser than Gerald, and that people may often be feeling very full of sincere desire to do right, and indulging and enjoying many beautiful religious exercises, whilst all the while they are cherishing in their hearts some unknown secret sin, or else are blinding their eyes, as Gerald did, to the fact that it was sin, telling themselves that they are

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fully justified by circumstances and that they "do well to be angry," as Jonah boldly confessed he did.

Gerald did not come to meet us that day as had of late been his custom. Dame Truman told us he was in one of his depressed moods, and hoped that we should be able to cheer him up.

"He has not looked so grave or sad since the day you saw him first," she answered. "I think he must have something on his mind."

We went up to Gerald's room, and found him enthroned in his big arm-chair in an attitude expressive of dejection and care. He was rather fond of "posing"—this curious boy—as I had found out long ago, and I knew better than to laugh at him or to let him see I saw through his half-unconscious affectations. Tim took them all in perfect good faith, as an indication of great histrionic power. He always admired Gerald immensely when he was in one of his lofty, unapproachable moods, and he promptly sat down with his chin in his hands watching and studying him intently.

This kind of respectful reverential deportment did much to appease Gerald. It appealed to the weak side of his nature—the love of producing effect—and the cloud that had rested on his brow at our entrance lightened and lifted somewhat. When he spoke it was in the mild melancholy

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tone of voice that had been more marked at first than it was now. Latterly he had learned to speak with more energy and more cheerfulness.

"You have sometimes expressed a wish to hear something of my melancholy story. I have promised to tell the tale, but have ever kept putting it off from day to day. I think the time has arrived when it were best you should know all. Will it please you to hear the narrative now?"

This speech had evidently been carefully prepared, and was delivered with a good deal of effect. Tim got up, bowed, and made answer:

"An it please your grace to favour us thus far;" evidently imagining it was part of a game of Gerald's composition.

He was perhaps a little disconcerted; but as Tim was in his own way as serious as any of us, he let the reply pass unobserved, and addressed himself most of the time to me.

"I am the grandson and the only surviving descendant of the unworthy owner of this house, who does not deserve the noble name he bears, the honourable name of Ducie."

Tim was much surprised at this piece of news.

"Do you *really* belong to the old man Aunt Tabby tells me about, who used to live here once, and whose ancestors fought against Cromwell's soldiers when they came to knock down his house? Oh, how I should like to have him

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for a relation! Is it real, Gerald? Or are you playing a game?"

"I wish I were," he answered, his brow contracting sharply. "Not that I am not proud of my name and race, but I would that any blood but *his* ran in my veins."

"Why?" asked Tim astonished. "Aunt Tabby says he is a very fine old man."

I checked Tim by a glance, for I thought Gerald would have flown into a passion at that; but Tim subsided and he controlled himself, only showing how he had been moved by dropping his studied artificial manner, and speaking in a way at once more natural, more intelligible, and more agreeable to listen to.

"I hate that man, though he is my grandfather," he said quickly and hotly, "and perhaps when you know more you will know why. My mother was his only child, and my father was the only son of his brother, his only brother who died a soldier's death in India when his son was but a boy. My grandfather became guardian of the child, who had also lost his mother, and Reginald Ducie, my father, was brought up in this house where my grandfather lived with his daughter. You understand the relationships, don't you?"

I nodded and Gerald went on.

"The old man loved his daughter devotedly but selfishly. He wanted to keep her always at home

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with him. Her cousin, who was a year or two older, loved her and she loved him; they had loved each other always from their very childhood, anyone might have seen it; they made no secret of it, but the old man seemed blind, he could not or would not see. When they told him of their love and asked his blessing, he flew into a violent rage—the Ducies have always been passionate—and vowed they should never marry. He stormed and raved and swore, and said that Reginald Ducie should leave his house that very night. My father took him at his word and went, but he did not go alone. My mother shared his flight, and they were married in Scotland the next day. They lived happily for many years despite the furious anger of the old father, and then my father died.

"When I can first remember anything I was living alone with my mother, and we were very poor. I think I just remember my father, but I can hardly be certain. He died when I was six, but he had been more than a year away on foreign service. He was in the army, and he died of fever at the Cape. I can remember the news of his death coming. Mother was nearly wild with grief; but she had to work to keep us, for father's pension was very small, and had it not been that she could do fine needlework very beautifully, I don't know what would have be-

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come of us. I did not know then that I had a grandfather; but as mother used to sit at work over her needle, she used to tell me of this house where she had lived all her life till she married, and gradually I learned the whole story from her. Of course I did not understand properly the reason my mother had for feeling she could never write to him or see him again, and I used often to beg her to do so, though she always said it would be no use, as her father had cast her off and that a Ducie never forgot. I don't know whether she would have changed her mind if it had not been for the very bad illness I had when I was eight years old; but that illness and the poverty and want it brought upon us settled the matter, and she forgot her own pride in love towards me. It was that illness," continued Gerald with a flush rising slowly in his face, "that made me what I am now. I was straight and strong and shapely like all the Ducies for generations till that long illness came, and if I had had medical skill and fresh air and plentiful food—all those things that my grandfather could have supplied me with by a scratch of his pen—I should have been restored even then, and have conquered the weakness that has now conquered me. But though my mother wrote again and again no answer ever came back, no notice was taken of a single one of those letters. It was as if she had

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addressed the dead—not a sign or a sound could be evoked. Had it not been that she must have heard if it had been so, she would have thought he must be dead; for he had loved her once, and had loved her husband too.

"Well, I was ten years old when I once more rose from my bed to find myself what I am now. My mother, worn and wasted from long attendance on me, fell ill at last herself, and then it was almost on charity we lived; for even in health the pension my mother received was not enough for our wants, how much less in times of sickness. Fancy the daughter and grandson of a man of great wealth and property living on the charity of strangers! Fancy a Ducie degraded thus! The clergyman who visited my mother, and attended most kindly to our wants, heard our strange story from her lips a few weeks before she died. I always think that it was his doing that my grandfather appeared at last, just a week before she left us; but I was by that time so wild with grief myself, that I remember little about those terrible days. I do remember my hatred for the wicked old man whose neglect and cruelty had caused her death and given me a life-long sorrow. I do remember that he wanted me to live with him, and that I utterly and entirely refused. I would only come here on condition nobody saw me or knew I was here. How can I face the

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world mal-formed, hideous as I am? I longed after the house my mother had so often described to me. I said I would come here, if he would promise to keep away; and I suppose very shame made him grant all I asked. For though he brought me here last winter and put me under Dame Truman's care, he went away in two days and has never come back; and he is under a promise never to visit this house so long as I am in it, until I bid him. And that will be never—never!"

A pause followed the conclusion of this curious tale, and then Tim looked up as if he did not think it could be finished.

"And when will you send for him?" he asked with eager interest.

"Never!" cried Gerald sharply. "Never, never! Didn't you hear me say so?"

"But why?" and Tim looked surprised and disappointed. Gerald made an impatient gesture.

"I suppose you are too young to understand."

"I understand all you've told us," answered Tim boldly. "Your mother and grandfather quarrelled and she ran away; but they made it up when she was dying, and now he's taken you and given you a lovely house to live in and everything you want, and let you have a secret and a mystery, and do just whatever you like; and now I want to know when he will come, for

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he must be a very nice kind old man, and I should like him to tell me all about his ancestors, and what they did when people lived in history times. I wish it was history now—it must have been so much nicer to live when it was."

I was glad Tim's mind had been diverted from the original topic, for Gerald's brow had grown black as night. As the child went off into a reverie on his own account, I heard the elder boy mutter between his clenched teeth—

"I will never see him, never forgive him—never! never!"

Tim heard that too, and it roused him from his abstraction.

"But isn't it wicked not to forgive?"

"No!" was the quick, fierce answer.

"Oh!" returned Tim uncertainly. "I thought it was; I thought it said so in the Bible."

Now I read with grandmother the lessons for the day each morning, and Gerald had yesterday informed me with some complacency that he did the same. It chanced that this very day the chapter had contained a good deal about the duty of forgiveness, and the uselessness of our approaching God in prayer if we did not come to him with right feelings in our hearts towards our fellow-men. If Gerald thought at all about what he read this idea must surely have crossed his mind; and I think it had, for when I looked at

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him, almost without intending to do so, I saw that a deep flush had risen to his brow.

"One can't always," he muttered hoarsely, more to himself than to me.

Tim was thinking deeply.

"Suppose he was very sorry, wouldn't you forgive him then?"

"I don't know."

"Suppose he was going to die, would you forgive him then?"

Gerald paused and considered the question.

"Yes," he said presently, with the air of one who is making a great concession. "I think perhaps if he were to be dying, and wanted to see me and to hear me say I forgave him, that I would. I would go to him then, or let him come here, and then I would tell him that I would overlook the past and forgive him; I think I could do it then."

"And suppose you were to die first, what would happen then?" asked Tim, who took great interest in the subject.

Gerald made no reply, his face first flushed a little and then grew rather pale.

"Suppose you were to die before you had forgiven him," persisted Tim, "what would happen then?"

Again there was no reply. I don't know what was in Gerald's mind then, but in my ears

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some words seemed to ring with persistent iteration:

"Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven; for if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither shall your Heavenly Father forgive you your trespasses."

I think something of this kind was in Gerald's mind as he was confronted by Tim's simple question. It was not put with any idea of pointing a moral or catching him in a pit; possibly that was why it produced so much effect. Tim had not the least idea of putting Gerald to the blush, or of saying anything striking, but I do not see how the matter could have been more concisely worded.

"Suppose you were to die before you had forgiven him, what would happen then?"

Gerald was not a careless, irreligious, ignorant boy. He had read and thought and prayed in solitude, and was quite prepared, or ought to have been, with an answer to such a question. Had anyone else been concerned he would have replied very readily, that if the person in question would not or could not obey that simple mandate, and chose to die disobedient rather than yield, he must then go before his Maker with the disobedience and the unpardoned sin upon his head. He had been fully warned, and had perfectly understood the warning; if he chose to

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ignore it he must take the consequences. Gerald was not one to mince matters. Whenever any abstract question of right or wrong had arisen in our many discussions, he had always spoken his mind with great frankness and freedom, and was always disposed to be rather hard and unrelenting in his judgments. Would he have the moral courage and the sincerity to face the situation fairly, when he was the person most concerned?

I did not know, and his face, though it showed some agitation, told no tales. I sat as silent as himself. Again it was Tim who spoke.

"I do wish you'd forgive him and make friends. It would be nice if he came here too. I should like ever so much to see him."

Gerald, however, seemed so indisposed to talk that I presently took Tim away. I saw that the little boy's words had had some effect (much more than any from me would have done), because they were so perfectly spontaneous and natural, and I thought it a pity to disturb such effect as had been produced. Tim had spoken in perfect good faith, without the smallest idea of pointing a moral, and Gerald knew this as well as I. It was this simplicity that had given the words their weight.

"It does seem a pity, doesn't it, Dinah?" said Tim when we had discussed Gerald's story in

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the privacy of the ruins. "I don't think a family feud is nice, *really*. It doesn't matter in games and books, because the point of it is that it is going to be made up; but when it's *really* there it doesn't seem nice at all, and one can't convince real people like one can when one writes a book or makes a game. Gerald would only get into a passion if I went and knelt down at his feet and begged and implored him to forgive his grandfather and make friends. If he had only lived in history times I'd have done it directly, and he'd have been sure to listen to me."

"Never mind, Tim," I answered consolingly; "you said what you thought, and now we must let him think about it by himself. Perhaps he will feel differently by and by. You know he got very strange with never having anybody to talk to; he is much nicer already than he used to be. I daresay he will go on getting nicer and gentler still."

"I hope he will. It doesn't seem quite nice to go on hating anyone so, especially when he's your grandfather and is kind to you. If I'd a grandfather whose ancestors had fought against Cromwell, I shouldn't know how to be fond of him enough!"

I don't know how much Tim let out at home about the history we had heard. I never liked

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to weigh him down with reminders of secrecy; and besides, as I plainly saw, grandmother and Aunt Tabitha knew perfectly well what was going on at the old house, and the secret was an open one on both sides. But Tim had no idea of this, only he imagined that so long as he did not state in set terms that Gerald Ducie was living there he kept the secret admirably. It never occurred to him that he could possibly be betraying anyone's confidences by putting to his aunt a number of suppositious cases of abstract right and wrong, and asking her opinion thereupon.

Accordingly the very next day, as he was helping her to water her flowers just about sundown, even the fascination of watching the working of the garden-hose could not keep him silent, and I kept hearing scraps of dialogue such as this:

"Suppose he had been unkind—suppose he had been unkind to your mother even—is that any reason why you should *never* forgive him?"

"My dear child," said Aunt Tabitha in her decisive way, "it is not for us poor sinful creatures to deny at any time our forgiveness to one another. Our duty is always to forgive as we hope to be forgiven."

"Now, that's what I thought!" cried Tim. "I didn't think it *could* be right for people to

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keep up feuds—not unless they lived in history times."

Aunt Tabitha asked no questions, and presently Tim began again:

"Suppose you had one shoulder a little bit higher than the other, Aunt Tabby, and suppose your back was a little bit bent, what would you do then?"

"Try to get it straight again, to be sure."

"Do you think you could?"

"That would depend upon a good many things. If I were young I daresay it could be done if I were only patient and obedient."

"And suppose it couldn't?"

"Why, then, I should try to make the best of it."

"You wouldn't go and shut yourself up and want nobody to know there *was* any you?"

"Certainly not."

"And you wouldn't think everybody was pointing the finger of scorn at you if ever you stirred abroad?"

"Not unless I had a much worse opinion of the world than I have now."

"Well, now, that's just how I feel about it," said Tim. "I think you must be a very sensible woman, Aunt Tabby; because I find when I talk to you that we nearly always think the same. But do you think if people have bent backs

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when they are young they could really get them put right? Do you call it young to be about twelve?"

"Young enough very often to get backs put to rights if their owners will do as they're told. But young folks are not always very fond of doing that."

"No," answered Tim solemnly, "I don't think they are," and he fell into a deep reverie.

"Aunt Tabby," he said presently, "I think having a garden to take care of ought to make people see that it's best to do what big people say, don't you?"

"Why, Tim?"

"Why, don't you see, *they* know how to make the flowers come up straight and nice and perfect—when they are clever with plants like you. I'm sure the way you nip their heads off, and pull them about, and tie them this way and that, and won't let them go their own way, seems very unkind at first—at least it did to *me*. But now that they're grown big and strong I can see how much better they are for it. I wouldn't have my plants touched, you know, and they are getting all straggly and don't bloom a bit like yours. If I come here again next summer, I shall be always snipping off the heads of my plants as they come on."

Aunt Tabitha laughed then. She did not

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often do more than smile a little grimly as she listened to Tim's discourse, but his remarks on gardening always seemed to tickle her fancy.

"Well, Tim, if you come again you had better act as my under-gardener and work under my direction. One can nip and snip too much as well as too little. You'd better take your own moral to heart, and let your plants teach you the lesson that until you have grown to years of discretion you had better submit in all things to the guidance of your elders."

Tim's eyes were round and big, I heard him murmuring to himself:

"Years of discretion—submit in all things to guidance of elders." I felt certain he was trying to impress these words on his mind that he might rehearse them for Gerald's benefit.

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CHAPTER VIII.

THE CAVE IN THE WOOD.

"AUNT TABBY!"

"Yes, Tim" (absently).

"Aunt Tabby!"

"Well, child?"

"Suppose it were going to be your birthday next week."

"Well, child?"

"And suppose it were to be a very nice fine day as well."

"Yes."

"And suppose you were a little boy like me. Have you supposed all that, Aunt Tabby?"

"Well, child, I don't know how I can suppose I am what I never have been, but go on."

"Well, what do you think you would like to do to amuse yourself?"

This dialogue was distinctly audible to grandmother and me as we sat together at work in her parlour. Tim and Aunt Tabitha were outside, and the latter was engaged in some horticultural task, whilst my little brother was, as

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usual, intent on watching and admiring her handiwork. I knew very well that Tim's birthday was approaching, but I was hardly prepared for this broad allusion to the fact.

"Bless the child! How should I know? When we were children we didn't think so much of treats as you do nowadays. A little went a long way with us."

"Well, that was a great advantage I should think. But I suppose you thought of nice things sometimes?"

"I am sure, child, I do not know. I think I never had your imagination."

"Ah! that must be rather dull," said Tim in his reflective way. "Didn't you ever play games in your head, and suppose you were somebody else? I don't know what I should do without supposing!"

"I can guess you would feel rather lost," said Aunt Tabitha drily.

"Well, if I was lost, Dinah would soon find me. But people never are lost now; it would be more interesting sometimes if they were. I wonder—" and here Tim seemed to go off in a reverie, which was interrupted by our aunt.

"And about this birthday of yours. What do you want to do with it?"

"I—I—didn't say anything about a birthday

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of *mine*, did I?" said Tim, as if a little shocked at the suggestion.

"Well, if you didn't say it I suppose you meant it," was the sharp retort.

"Well, it *is* my birthday next week," answered Tim with some hesitation; "but I don't quite know what made you think of it just then."

"Thought I was as dense as a brick wall, eh? Well, child, out with it. What is it you have set your heart on?"

"Well, I thought it might be rather nice to go out for the day with Dinah—and—and somebody else—in the little cart with the little wee pony, and have a romantic day in the woods by ourselves, and do just what we wanted—like as if we were Robin Hood's merry, merry men. Aunt Tabby, did you ever do that when you were little?"

"No; our heads weren't so full of trash."

"Oh, dear! how dull it must have been. But wouldn't you—wouldn't you like to begin now?"

"Do you mean that you meant me when you said Dinah and somebody else, eh?"

For a moment there was no answer. I guessed that Tim had blushed up to his ears.

"Well, to tell the truth, I wasn't *exactly* thinking of you, Aunt Tabby. I didn't think p'raps that you'd care about the little cart; but of course if you would *like* it—"

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But Aunt Tabitha interrupted him with a laugh.

"Not I, thanks, child. Little folks are best let alone to their own foolish games. But if you want it, I'm sure you can have the cart and go picnicking if it will give you any pleasure."

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Tabby,—we should like it ever so much!" and then there was a long pause, and we heard the snip of Aunt Tabitha's clippers, and at last Tim began again:

"Aunt Tabby!"

"Well, child?"

"Do you think if anybody sat in the bottom of the cart, and was well covered up, he could be hidden so that nobody could see?"

I almost raised my voice to hush Tim at that point, and felt the hot colour rush over my face. My little brother seemed, in the innocence of his heart, to be betraying his most treasured secret, and I fully expected that this question would bring so many inquiries upon him that he would almost be obliged to betray Gerald's secret. But somehow this did not happen. Either Aunt Tabitha was too much used to Tim's imaginings to pay much heed to them, or more probably she had other reasons for taking no notice of his words, for all she said was spoken in the most matter-of-fact way possible.

"Oh, yes, I daresay. Children can generally

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manage that kind of thing when they have a mind to."

And then the subject dropped, or else the speakers moved away, for we heard no more of them; and grandmother asked me no questions, though I am sure she had heard all, and there was a half smile upon her face as she sat still with her busy needle flying.

When I joined Tim in the garden after my task was done, I found him in a state of considerable elation and excitement.

"Dinah, I'm going to have a birthday treat—and I've got *such* an idea!"

"Well, Tim, what is it?"

"We've to have the little cart and the little pony—Aunt Tabby says so—and I want us to go to the wood where the cave is. And oh, Dinah, I want us to take Gerald too!"

"But, Tim, do you think he would come?"

"Well, I don't know; but I think p'r'aps he would, if we covered him up quite, and didn't let anybody know. He *awfully* wants to see the cave."

"How does he know about it?"

"Well, he'd heard something himself, and then I told him what Phœbe had told us; and I could see he wanted to go just as much as I did, though he wouldn't say so. Oh, Dinah, I do believe I could coax him to come."

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I had a good deal of faith myself in Tim's powers of persuasion, but I could hardly believe they would be successfully exerted here, in face of the boy's vehement determination to bury himself alive in the gloomy old house all alone. Still it was possible he might be tempted out, and I knew how pleased his faithful attendant would be if this thing could be accomplished.

The cave mentioned by Tim was a queer place, half natural and half artificial, that had been described to us by Phœbe on more than one occasion. There were some galleries and workings of an old mine, and a sort of cavern where stalactites were to be seen. The place had an evil reputation amongst the country folks, who had a lingering belief in its being infested by pixies and goblins; and undoubtedly long ago a man had been murdered there, or had committed suicide, for a skeleton had once been discovered by a party of tourists, and since that time the cave had been more shunned than ever.

Any story of this kind fascinated Tim immensely. His vivid imagination excited his curiosity rather than his fears, and he longed to visit this cave. We had talked of it many times, but I had not exactly seen how it was to be managed, as it was too far for a walk, and the old house drew us like a magnet day by day.

All dinner-time I saw that Tim's mind was

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very full of some new idea. He hardly spoke once all the while, and as soon as we were in the garden together he pounced upon me in that fashion to which I was quite accustomed.

"Oh, Dinah, I've got such an idea!"

"What, Tim?"

For a moment his ideas seemed to come so fast that he had to gasp, and then stop short as if to arrange them.

"Oh, Dinah, don't you think the cave might do for a kind of hiding-place?"

"A hiding-place for what?"

"Oh, for Gerald, you know."

"But Gerald doesn't want one."

"No, not now—not just this very minute; but he *might* want one very much indeed."

"But why?"

"Oh, don't you see—there might be some people who would come to his house, or find out that he was there, and he might want to fly; and if he did the cave would make a lovely place, and we would supply him with food. You know they used to do that kind of thing in mediæval times."

Tim always threw himself with such zest into any idea or situation of such a kind that I could not but sympathize in the enjoyment it gave him.

"I see—well, perhaps it might if he really had to run away. Are you going to tell him about it and get him to come?"

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"Yes. I'm going now. Will you come too?"

"I can't. Grandmother expects some friends, and she wants me to stay at home to see them."

"Well, then, I'll go alone and talk to him. You see, Dinah, I don't quite *understand* why it's all so secret, and he has to hide away from everybody; but of course it would be very dreadful for him to be discovered now. So I think if we could only find a place where he could fly to if people came to his house, or if anything betrayed him, it would be a great relief to him. I'll ask him."

I could not help smiling as Tim ran off full of this new idea. The way my little brother was always ready to out-herod Herod could not but strike me as something comic. But I thought it possible it might do Gerald good to be induced to reconsider his position, and see that there was a certain amount of absurdity in his determined isolation of himself, which was very apparent when Tim took up the notion in such good faith and exaggerated his hero's idiosyncrasies. I wondered whether it would strike Gerald in the same light.

Tim came back in time for tea, looking full of importance and elation.

"Dinah, I believe he'll come—I really do. He wouldn't quite promise, but I can see he wants to. He asked if we were *sure* we could cover him up so that nobody could see him, and when

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I told him I was sure we could, and that we didn't pass any houses worth speaking of, and hardly ever a cottage, he almost decided he'd do it. He's not been out of the place since he came, and he does want to see the cave. He thinks perhaps we might find some treasure, or a buried skeleton. I shall take a spade with me."

"Well, I'm glad he will come. I'm sure it will be good for him."

"Yes; and then he'll know the way if he ever has to fly there for safety."

"Did you tell him so?"

"Yes; we talked about it a good deal."

"Was he pleased?"

"Oh, yes, I think so. I told him exactly how he might manage, and how we would bring him food and everything. I had it all in my head by that time, and I explained everything to him."

"And what did he say?"

"Oh, not so very much. And, you know, *I* think it would be much nicer if he would make friends with his grandfather if ever he came back. But, you know, Gerald doesn't think he ever will, so in that case *of course* he would want a place to stay in of his own; and what *could* be nicer than the cave? Nobody would ever see him there."

Indeed this idea of hiding Gerald in the cave, and keeping him supplied with the necessaries of

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life took such hold of Tim's imagination that he thought of little else for many days. We were somewhat hindered in our visits to the old house by a succession of heavy thunder-storms; but we found that Dame Truman had heard of the birth-day plan and was eager that it should be carried out, and had used such influence as she possessed to coax her charge into accepting the invitation we had brought.

I suppose Gerald was really more tired of his lonely life than he would have cared to admit. At any rate, though he liked to be persuaded and urged, and appeared to consent almost against his will, I felt sure he wanted all along to form one of our little party; and when the eventful day had come at last, and our little equipage rolled up to the backdoor, Dame Truman came out nodding and smiling, and behind her was Gerald, looking rather pale and nervous, yet visibly excited and elated.

"Come along, come along!" cried Tim, who had got out and was piling rugs and cushions into a luxurious kind of nest in the bottom of the cart. "We'll cover you up so that nobody shall see, and you'll be so comfortable. You're to be Prince Charlie escaping from the soldiers; and we are just loyal Jacobites who are pretending to be taking a pig to market, or something like that. Dinah might be Flora Macdonald, mightn't she?

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And Gerald, you must grunt and squeal if anybody comes and speaks to us."

Poetry and prose seemed to get mixed up together a good deal at times in Tim's imaginings; but his boundless good faith carried us with him in spite of the bathos. Gerald submitted to play the part of the royal fugitive, and played it with a good deal of languid grace; and I think that the idea of his assumed character helped to make this first expedition beyond the limits of the grounds less strange and painful to him than it must otherwise have been.

Indeed the road, or rather lane, down which we passed, was so exceedingly quiet that there was nothing to alarm him, and he was so well covered up that no passing traveller would ever notice him. It was a bright warm day, and there was something exhilarating in the soft balmy breeze as it blew in our faces, as well as in the song of the many birds who carolled overhead. Gerald looked about him with manifest pleasure and wonder. Things must have been strange to one who had lived so long excluded from the beautiful world in which he lived.

He was in one of his more softened and melancholy moods, self-conscious perhaps, but more agreeable than the gusty passions with which we sometimes had to deal. I had not seen much of him since he had told us his story, and I knew

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that he was often thinking of it to-day, and wondering perhaps what we thought about it all.

Tim was rather absorbed on his side, and after a long silence he suddenly burst out with one of his favourite abstract questions.

"Suppose one hated a man very much, do you think one would like to feel indebted to him for anything?"

I did not answer, but Gerald rose up from his reverie to say with quick decision:

"Of course not—at least not anyone who had a spark of proper pride."

Tim looked puzzled for a moment, and then asked with his most innocently interested air:

"Then, Gerald, is it that you haven't a spark of proper pride, or that you don't hate your grandfather after all?"

Gerald's face was a study; first a look of great astonishment crossed it, and then it darkened like a thunder-cloud.

"What do you mean?" he asked hoarsely.

"Why, I was thinking that you couldn't hate him so very much, as you live in his house and he takes care of you. One naturally wouldn't care about living in one's enemy's house. That's why I felt that the cave might come in so useful."

Gerald had no reply ready as it seemed, and I

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started the pony at a brisk trot, so that for a moment the conversation was suspended. I was not altogether sorry that Tim should have put the case in this fashion before the eyes of the self-willed boy, but at the same time I did not want our day spoiled by one of Gerald's outbreaks.

We were now entering the wood in which the cave was situated. The country looked wilder and more hilly as we turned off from the main road, and Tim was absorbed in contemplation of a really romantic scene.

It took us some little time to get to our destination, for the woodland track grew more and more rough and uneven, and we had to go at a foot's pace, so as to save Gerald as much jolting as possible.

Tim jumped out and walked alongside, playing with great gusto his part of loyal protector to our royal fugitive, running on in advance to see that there was no ambushed foe waiting to spring out upon us, and coming back at intervals to report that all was well. He seemed to have forgotten his remarks of a short time back, and Gerald's brow slowly cleared, as the cloud that had rested upon it passed away.

At last the road grew almost indistinguishable, save for the absence of trees along the track, and, by the look of the rocks ahead of us, we

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knew that we could not be far from the cave's mouth.

We decided to get out here and spread our luncheon in an inviting little hollow, and look about us at our leisure. Luckily Dobbin was no anxiety, for he was so quiet and tame that he could be safely unharnessed and left to his own devices.

Gerald was stronger than I thought we should find him, and was quite ready to explore the cave with the eager Tim. I knew that it was a safe place enough, despite the evil name it had acquired, or else I might have felt a little nervous at entering such a dark chill place with only the light of a little lantern to guide us.

"Suppose the light should go out—should we ever find our way out?" asked Tim stopping short, and Gerald's face was turned towards me in a sort of momentary awe; but when I told them I had a box of matches in my pocket as well as a piece or two of wax candle-end, both were quite satisfied, and we went on cautiously over the uneven floor, admiring the stalactites which hung here and there from the roof, and listening with something of trembling delight to the hollow reverberation of sound which followed on any loud shout. After the first startled feeling of *eeriness*, Tim was delighted at the way the echoes sounded through the cave in answer to his shout.

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The workings of the old mine were really quite interesting to us, and not so complicated as to make me fear losing our way. Gerald seemed to know something about the formation of rocks, and grew animated and more really boyish than I had ever seen him before in his newly-aroused interest in what he saw. He produced a little hammer, and both he and Tim filled their pockets with "specimens;" and it was with some little difficulty that at last I persuaded them to come back.

Tim always took up a new idea with great ardour, and was eager to obtain all possible information on the subject of rock, and metal, and fossils.

"And suppose you come to live in the cave, you will get quite a learned man by and by," he remarked. "You know, living underground will give you so many advantages. Dinah, what kind of knowledge is it about things, that Aunt Tabby is always saying people ought to have?"

"Do you mean practical knowledge, Tim?"

"Yes, that's it—practical knowledge. Don't you think it would give Gerald a great deal of practical knowledge if he were to live here?"

Gerald did not respond to this suggestion, and presently we went out into the sunshine again, and found that we were all thinking about lunch.

A picnic was quite a novelty to Gerald, and

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almost as strange to us, and very much we enjoyed the unpacking of the baskets of good things, and the sociable feast which followed. Tim waited upon our guest with great assiduity, and no unfortunate topics were introduced. The pony came up to be fed with bread and sugar, and we all finished by a refreshing draught of pure water from a little spring.

Then the two boys got playing together as they often did, and seeing them happy and interested I went off to make a little sketch of a bit of woodland scenery that had taken my fancy. I was no great hand at drawing, and was almost entirely self taught, but I had a love for jotting down little outlines which I could always fill up from memory afterwards, and which would suffice to remind me of the different scenes visited during these pleasant months, when we should have gone back to the prose of everyday life.

I do not quite know how long it was before Tim joined me; squatting down at my feet with a somewhat disconsolate air.

"Where is Gerald?" I asked.

"Gerald is cross."

"Is he? What about?"

"I don't know. I don't think he had any particular reason. I think he likes to be cross sometimes."

"But where is he?"

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"Oh, in there," and Tim pointed vaguely.

"Do you mean in the cave?"

"Yes."

"All alone?"

"Yes—he told me to go away."

"Is he in the dark?"

"No, he has the lantern. I had to find my way out in the dark."

Tim's feelings were evidently somewhat outraged; probably he had given offence without intending it, as had happened before with Gerald, whose temper was certainly capricious and difficult.

But I did not like the idea of leaving the boy all alone in his gloomy retreat, and began gathering up my drawing materials preparatory to going in search of him.

"What made him angry first, Tim?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"What were you doing?"

"We were only pretending. We were playing at being fugitives in the cave, and were making nice arrangements how we could live. I liked it very much, especially as I thought it mightn't be all pretending some day for Gerald. We got talking about things, and all of a sudden he went off into one of his rages and told me to go away. I said he ought to say 'Avaunt!' as we were mediæval in the game; but he only stamped his

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foot and got angrier and angrier, and so I left him alone. You know I had to—because he was Prince Charles and I was only a peasant. I don't know if he'll let you come in. Perhaps he might, as you're Flora Macdonald; but I don't think I must try."

"You can harness Dobbin, Tim dear, and get everything ready. I think it will soon be time to be going home. You see, Gerald is not used to being out in the air and away from home. I daresay it makes him rather excitable. Perhaps we had better take him back now?"

"You don't think he means to stay here, then?"

"No; I don't think it at all likely."

"It would be a good opportunity," said Tim with a little sigh; "but perhaps you know best, Dinah. You're the biggest of us."

I could not help smiling as I kissed Tim's serious little face. He took everything with such absolute good faith, and was so much in earnest.

"Are you going to find Gerald?"

"Yes; do you know where he is?"

"Not exactly: we were looking for fossils. Suppose he was to go and get lost?"

"I don't think he would do that."

"Or suppose he were to hide away?"

"I should find him by his light."

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"Oh, yes, I suppose you would. Well, perhaps he won't be so cross to *you*. I don't know why it is he is sometimes so angry."

"Never mind, Tim dear; I do not think he means it. You know he is not used to playing as we are, and he often thinks things are meant differently from what they are. That is all, and it is not anything to trouble about."

So Tim, satisfied by this rather vague explanation, went off to coax Dobbin into his harness—such of it, at least, as had been removed—and I took the path which led to the cave, a little nervous lest any mischance should have befallen Gerald there; for he was so unused to strange places that this dark chill cavern might well have some terrors for him, and the floor was uneven and might be difficult for him to traverse when burdened with the light.

I fully expected to see the gleam of the lantern as soon as I had stepped within the cave, and had grown used to the black darkness reigning there; but I looked for it, and looked in vain, as I advanced cautiously towards the interior.

I felt some surprise and a little uneasiness as I looked round me; and then I raised my voice and called; but though the echoes answered me back a hundred times, there was no response from Gerald. I thought he must surely have heard his name shouted; but then, if he were in

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one of his stubborn moods it was very possible that he would not speak.

So I lighted one of my pieces of candle and stepped cautiously forward over the uneven rocky floor. I was pretty certain that I should find him in one of the galleries opening out of the entrance vault, and thither I took my way, guarding my light as carefully as I could, for gusts of cold air from time to time blew upon it.

As I walked I looked about me, and called to Gerald every few moments, but without getting any answer. I was beginning to feel just a little uneasy at this total silence and darkness, when suddenly my foot struck against something that seemed to roll away from me, and stooping to pick it up I saw it was the lantern.

If the lantern had fallen and gone out, Gerald could not well be very far away. I lighted the little bull's-eye and looked well about me. And then I saw, crouched up in a corner, the figure of Gerald, in such a shrinking, cowed attitude that I hardly knew him; and his face looked as white as death in the gleam of the light, whilst his great dark eyes, dilated by terror or some other emotion, seemed like stars shining out of the gloom.

"Why, Gerald," I said, going up and putting my hand on his shoulder, "what is the matter with you?"

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595

DINAH FINDS GERALD CROUCHING IN THE CAVE.

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He gave a sort of gasp, and clutched tight hold of my hand.

"The light went out!" he panted. "I thought I should never get out!"

"You did not think we should leave you behind?"

"I couldn't tell! I had told Tim never to come near me any more!"

He kept fast hold of my hand all the time he was talking, and I could feel that he was still trembling in every limb.

"Are you very cold? Don't sit there any longer. Won't you come out into the sunshine? I think you have had enough of the cave."

He rose to his feet slowly, and looked out into the darkness with a gleam of such terror in his eyes that I almost trembled myself.

"Is there nothing—nobody there?"

"No, Gerald; only ourselves."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes—I am quite sure."

His clutch tightened on my arms, and drops glistened on his brow—drops of deadly terror.

"I thought—I thought—that somebody called to me out of the darkness!"

"Why, Gerald, that was me," I answered ungrammatically. "I wanted to know where you were. Why didn't you answer back?"

"You? Was it you?" questioned the boy

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between his chattering teeth. "It did not sound a bit like *your* voice."

The emphasis on the pronoun was so marked that I could not help asking another question.

"Whose voice was it like, then, Gerald?"

He nipped my arm so hard that I almost cried out. His voice was only a hoarse whisper:

"I thought it was my mother calling—I thought she was coming for me!"

"And you were afraid?"

"Oh, it was terrible—I thought I should have died!"

I thought I had better not talk upon the subject any more, at any rate whilst we were in the cave, and hurried Gerald out as fast as I could. Plainly the nervous, imaginative boy had suffered much during the short half hour of his lonely sojourn in the cave, and I was not surprised on reaching daylight to see that his face was white as death.

"Shall we sit down a little while in this nice mossy hollow?" I asked. "You look tired, Gerald."

The boy sank down with an inarticulate sound as of relief; he turned his face away, and hid it in his hands. I did not know if he cared to talk or not, but I sat down beside him, and he moved slightly so as to press closely against me

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"I don't know that I was ever afraid of anything before. It is a horrid feeling. Why was it I was afraid?"

"Perhaps it was the darkness, Gerald."

"I don't know. I have often been in the dark before. Besides, why should I have been so afraid when I thought *she* was calling to me?"

"Your mother?"

"Yes; I loved her so. Why should I have felt afraid?"

I hardly knew how to answer such a question, it hardly seemed an unnatural fear; yet I had a sort of instinct as to what it was that was really troubling the boy, and after a moment of hesitation I said:

"Perhaps you had been thinking thoughts that you knew would have grieved your mother if she could have known them."

He looked at me quickly, lifting his head and meeting my eyes with something of a startled glance.

"How did you know?"

"I did not know, Gerald. I was only wondering."

His face was turned away for a moment. When he looked up at me, I saw that his eyes were full of tears.

"I never thought that it was wicked before,

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or that it might be. I thought it was brave and right, and that proper pride alone would make me—"

He did not seem to know quite how to finish his sentence, but I knew quite well what he meant.

"But you think your mother might tell you differently if she were here?"

"I had never thought about it like that before. I had always gone on thinking the sort of things I have said to you. I think it was Tim who made me see that things might be different—at least, that they might look different to other people. Dinah, do you think I ought not to go on living there if—?"

Again he stopped short, but there was no need for him to finish his sentence.

"I think it would be much happier if you could begin to feel a little differently," I said, half afraid of advising lest I should make him angry again.

"How can one make one's self feel different?" he asked abruptly.

"I do not think we can ever *make* ourselves different by ourselves; but you know, Gerald, we can get help."

He did not answer; but I knew that he understood, and after a long silence he said:

"But I don't think I do wish to be different."

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"That is a pity, Gerald."

"Do you think so?"

"Yes, indeed I do."

"Do you think about it as Tim does? That I ought not to go on living there. Do *you* think that I ought to live in the cave?"

"Oh, no, Gerald! That is just one of Tim's fancies."

"But—but—"

"You know you could not; your grandfather is your guardian, you must obey him."

"And be indebted to him?"

"Yes; you cannot help that. All you can do is to try and feel that you are doing your best to be grateful instead of angry."

'Do you think I *do* owe him anything, after—"

"Hush, Gerald, don't get angry again about it. Yes, I do think you owe him a good deal, and I think that if your mother were to be here to talk to you herself that she would say the same, and ask you to try and conquer your angry feelings—for her sake."

Gerald buried his face in his hands, and I heard him whisper softly to himself the words "For her sake" several times over.

"You really think so?" he said without looking up.

"Yes, I really do."

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Then there was a long silence, which he broke at last by saying:

"Well, I don't know about that. I can't see things quite as you do—but I'll think about it."

I put my hand on his shoulder, and made a great effort, for I can't easily say such things, though I want to sometimes when it seems almost as if one ought.

"And will you pray about it too, Gerald?"

He made no reply to that, but I did not think he would. I was rather glad he did not.

That was all that passed between us. I got up then and we went to find Tim, who was patiently awaiting our coming, with the pony and cart all in readiness.

"I thought you must have been lost in the cave," he remarked when we appeared. "I was wondering what I should do if you were. Suppose you hadn't come back, Dinah, what ought I to have done?"

"But you see we have come back, so we needn't trouble our heads over that. Let us make Gerald comfortable first, and then you shall drive home, Tim, if you will be very careful."

Tim's face beamed with pleasure. Dobbin did not take much driving, but to sit and hold the reins was a delight to the little boy, and kept

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him quiet most of the way home. I was rather glad of this, as I thought Gerald looked tired, and there was always a danger of Tim's lighting on some unfortunate subject. However, we gave up our charge to Dame Truman all safe and sound; and as we drove off again towards home Tim said:

"I think Gerald is nicer than he wants people to think he is. I'm very fond of him, though I don't think he always likes me."

"I think you do him a great deal of good, Tim darling," I could not help saying. "Have you had a very happy birthday?"

"Well, I think it's been more interesting than happy," answered Tim after a moment's sedate reflection; "but I'm glad we came and took Gerald. I think perhaps it is good for him. I wonder if he was pleased too. He didn't say much."

"No, but he thought a good deal, and perhaps that was better."

"Well, perhaps it was; and nobody saw him. Suppose Aunt Tabby had come after us, what *would* she have said?"

I shook my head at such an abstruse question, though I was beginning to have a suspicion that Aunt Tabby knew more about Gerald than we did ourselves.

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CHAPTER IX.

GRANDMOTHER'S STORY.

"NEVER mind the book to-day, Dinah, my dear," said my grandmother. "I will talk to you instead of reading."

I was quite pleased to hear that, for grandmother could tell most interesting stories, and I liked to listen whilst she talked better than anything. I thought her face had grown rather grave, as if she were thinking seriously, so I did not disturb her by any questions. I just plied my needle in silence waiting for her to begin.

"I have often thought of telling you the story, but put it off from day to day. I think, however, that the time has now come when it would be better that you should know all. You will understand it more clearly than you could possibly have done at first."

I felt quite certain now that she was going to speak of Gerald, nor was I mistaken. The story

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did not begin with him, but it led up to him and his strange lonely life in the old house.

"I think I have mentioned before that the owner of the old Manor House, where you and your brother play so much, is an old friend of mine, called Mr. Ducie?"

"Yes, grandmother."

"The Ducies are an old race, as you know, and I sometimes think that old families, who have lived much in one place and intermarried with county gentry as old as themselves, and as much imbued with the same kind of opinions and feelings, have very strong hereditary instincts of pride and self-importance and self-will, and are less easy to manage and are more disposed to take life hardly than those races where there has been more fusion of new ideas and new blood. Do you understand me, Dinah?"

"Partly, I think, grandmother. Were the Ducies very proud and self-willed?"

"Very; it was their great weakness amid very much that was admirable and lovable. It was said in the place that it was never safe to cross a Ducie. And I think I was almost the only person in the neighbourhood who ever argued with old Mr. Ducie. He and I, however, were always great friends. I had known and loved his wife,

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and when she died he consulted me very often about the bringing up of his only child, his daughter, Geraldine; though I cannot say he always took my advice. She was a very lovely girl, about the same age as your Aunt Dinah. Her father loved her to distraction, and spoiled her accordingly. She did not know an ungratified wish. She grew up not knowing what it was to be crossed in anything upon which she had set her heart. People hardly knew that she was self-willed, because she always had whatever she wished for as a matter of course.

"Mr. Ducie's nephew, an orphan lad a few years older that Geraldine, lived almost entirely with them at the Manor House. I often warned my old friend of the probability that the young things might fall in love with each other; but he only laughed at me for being 'romantic,' and declared that they only felt like brother and sister. But in the end, Dinah, when the young fellow had got his company, it appeared that they had for long been secretly engaged. When the father found it out there was a terrible scene. He was a passionate man himself, and Captain Ducie was even more violent in his temperament. His daughter was too true a child of his not to

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be violent and self-willed when crossed, and the end of it was that without waiting for the chance of a relenting on the father's part, or a softening of feeling on theirs, the girl eloped with her lover, married him the next day, and in a few weeks' time went off with him to India, he having exchanged into a regiment that was just ordered off there.

"After this we heard nothing of the self-willed young couple for some years. At first Mr. Ducie was very angry, and would not even have their names uttered in his hearing. Perhaps this feeling on his part was natural, for he had been devoted to his daughter, had given her every indulgence, surrounded her with every luxury, lavished on her the whole wealth of his love; and yet after the very first harsh word he had spoken to her in his life she had run away from home without a word of farewell, and had married, against his express wish, a man who was bound by every tie of gratitude to consider the wishes and feelings of one who had been as a father to him ever since he was a little lad. The two beings, in fact, who owed everything in the world to the old man's love and kindness, were content to leave him alone in loneliness and sorrow rather than exercise a little patience and self-

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restraint, and see if they could not win him over in time."

This was putting the matter in quite another light. My sympathies began at once to go over to poor old Mr. Ducie.

"Well, I must not make my story too long. After a few years the old man's heart began to melt towards his daughter; and he wrote several times to her begging that the past might be forgotten, and that she and her husband would come home and live with him in the old house, and let things be between them as before. But young people are sometimes very cruel and unforgiving, and the father's letters only elicited such cold repelling replies that presently he ceased to importune, and made up his mind to a lonely wandering life. He had shut up the Manor House and gone away very soon after his daughter's flight. Now disappointment and sorrow began to prey upon him, and he was ordered to travel for the sake of his health. For a year or two he went backwards and forwards to different baths and health resorts, and he seemed to grow much stronger and better. The fancy for travelling grew upon him, and about three years ago he joined an African exploring party, and was away nobody knew where for about

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two years. He wrote from time to time, though very rarely, and letters were forwarded to him at intervals by his man of business; but as it afterwards came out they had none of them been received. The difficulty and uncertainty of transport in those wild lands prevent any kind of certainty in the matter of posts.

"Meantime, unknown to him Captain Ducie had died, and Geraldine with her only child, a little boy, was living in poverty in England. For a long time she was too proud to apply to her father or attempt a reconciliation with him. No doubt she thought of the way in which she had received his overtures a little while back, and felt she did not deserve his forgiveness now. But at last her child fell very ill. He had always been a delicate boy, as children often are who are born and reared in India, and his very peculiar temperament had been an additional difficulty. Now that this illness had come, her slender means were quickly exhausted, and she began to write letters to her father imploring his assistance; and those letters, though duly forwarded to him, never reached him in the far away country where he was."

"Oh, he never got them! Now I understand better. But why was not Gerald told that?"

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I exclaimed all this before I remembered that I was not to betray any knowledge of Gerald's existence; but grandmother did not appear to notice, and went on quietly with her tale.

"About a year ago Mr. Ducie came back to England. He had hardly expected to return at all, for he had been laid up many times with fever and other illnesses, and his health was sadly shattered. But, as he said, life had ceased to have any value for him, and the wonders of the land he had been exploring had taken him out of himself better than anything else could do. He knew nothing of his daughter, knew not even if she were alive or dead. It never occurred to him that any of the lost letters could have been from her.

"A few months after his arrival in England a clergyman found him out and told him that his daughter, now a widow, was dying, leaving behind her one child in a very critical state of health. She was longing to be reconciled to her father; and Mr Ducie hastened to her in time to watch beside her during the last days of her life. Reconciliation was complete. His silence was explained, and she died happy, knowing that her child would be cared for now as tenderly as she could care for him. During the days he spent

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beside his dying daughter he hardly saw the boy. Gerald had never fully recovered from the illness, which had left its traces upon him in a spinal curvature as well as in a strange morbid condition of mind. He was more or less ill himself, and it was not thought well that he should be with his mother in her dying state. A nurse was procured for him, and it was not till after poor Geraldine's death that Mr. Ducie fully realized what a difficult charge he had undertaken in his grandson.

"The boy had got it into his head that his mother's death and the troubles of their past life had all been compassed by his grandfather, and the very sight of his face roused him to paroxysms of fury that were most injurious. The morbid condition of his mind and the feeble state of his body precluded the possibility of argument or restraint, and all Mr. Ducie could do was to send for an eminent medical man, and take counsel with him as to what could be done for the unhappy boy.

"Gerald's deformity was very slight; and the doctor pronounced it curable, but only curable if perfect rest and ease of mind could be obtained. The abnormal irritability of the brain acted very unfavourably upon the boy's whole system, and

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nothing could be done for him without a great deal of humouring and indulgence. Gerald himself, who had a great love of beauty, had grown terribly morbid over his own infirmity, which he chose to attribute entirely to the cruelty and harshness of his grandfather. He reiterated again and again that it would never have happened if they had been helped during the months of his long illness, and nothing anyone could say or do reconciled him to the sight of Mr. Ducie.

"The doctor and nurse between them, however, elicited a confession from the boy that he had a great wish to live in the old Manor House that had been so long his mother's home, and to live there quite alone under the care of his mother's old nurse Truman, who was then, as he knew, taking care of the shut-up house. He had such a morbid horror of being seen by strangers, of being visited or talked about, that he desired above everything for his very existence to remain a secret; and the doctor was of opinion that the best chance for his ultimate recovery was to humour him in the present, to take him to the old place and to let him fancy that not a soul knew of his residence there. Under the care of a kind sensible woman he would in all probability recover tone gradually, and tire of his solitude;

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and if he proved amenable to discipline, even the slight deformity might be cured in process of time.

"Mr. Ducie, anxious above all else in the world to promote the boy's health and happiness, submitted willingly to these curious terms, made all needful arrangements, and transported the boy to the old house himself. He really did try to preserve the desired secrecy; but he told his old friends the rector and myself all about it, and as he could not remain on the spot himself (for he was ordered abroad imperatively for the winter) asked us to exercise a sort of supervision of matters without seeing the boy, and keep down, if possible, any spread of village rumours. Dame Truman reports to us the progress made by her young charge, and we forward accounts to Mr. Ducie. Some rumours about the old house have been circulated of late, but all things considered the secret has been wonderfully well kept, the lonely isolation of the old house being much in its favour."

"And is Gerald better than he was?" I asked, feeling that the secret was fairly out now.

"Very much better; stronger in body and much less irritable and morbid of brain, although there is still much room for improvement there. The

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doctor saw him again in March and was well satisfied on the whole, though of opinion that the spinal mischief might be much more rapidly cured if Gerald would be more docile in submitting to rules and in doing as he advised. Still, progress even there was made; and the doctor told us that if he could be roused out of his lonely, melancholy ways, and begin to take an interest in people and things about him, it would be an immense advantage to him. He was, however, strongly of opinion that it was no use to try and force his inclinations. The impulse must come, or appear to him to come, from himself. It was a pity there were no children in the place. Children would be the best of companions for him just at first. However, all was going on well, and things must take their course quietly.

"This was just before you and Tim were to come to visit us, Dinah, my dear," pursued my grandmother, "and your aunt and I thought that possibly we might make use of you to try and coax Gerald out of his lonely ways and his morbid shrinking from the sight of strangers. When we found out your taste for old places we encouraged you to go and play about the Manor House, and Truman kept an eye on your move-

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ments, and tried to arouse Gerald to take an interest in your games. This he did very quickly, and would watch you closely from the windows, if he thought he could do so unseen. Then he wanted you to be let into the house that he might hear your voices more plainly, and at last Truman was certain that he quite longed to join the games; only he was too proud to say so, and could not quite get over the dislike of allowing anybody to see him with his crooked back. But we all felt certain how it would end, and you know more about that part of it than we do. Gerald has at last broken down the barrier, in part at least, and it is for you now to try and get it altogether removed. Mr. Ducie writes with the utmost gratitude and pleasure of what has been done so far. He is shortly to return to England for the summer months, and is most anxious that a reconciliation should be brought about. He asks me if I think that my grandchildren will be able to accomplish it. What am I to tell him, Dinah?"

"Oh, grandmother, dear, we will try—indeed we will! We said something about it once—about forgiving, I mean; and I think Gerald has not really got it out of his head ever since. He tries to think he is right not to forgive, but I am sure

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he knows it is really very wrong. I do think if Tim were to tell him the story as you have told it to me he would feel differently. I don't know what it is about Tim, but when he says things Gerald seems to pay much more attention than if I say them or Dame Truman."

"Well, my dear, you can tell Tim as much as you think fit, and act accordingly. We rely on your discretion a good deal; for we have watched you all these weeks, and we have found that you are quite fit to be trusted. You have acted with great care and good sense, and we have been pleased about it, and Mr. Ducie is so grateful to you that he cannot speak warmly enough about it. I hope to have better news yet for him soon."

"I hope you will indeed, grandmother," I answered earnestly, for I knew quite well what she meant. "When does Mr. Ducie come?"

"In about three weeks' time; and, Dinah, my dear, it is a matter of more consequence, perhaps, to that poor misguided boy than he will easily understand that he should be willing to see and be reconciled with his grandfather before it is too late. Poor Mr. Ducie's health is very frail. It is not at all likely that he will live much longer. He suffers from an incurable malady, and did he not spend most of the year at these medicinal

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springs he would not be living now. He will only be three months in England, and then he will have to go away again. It is quite likely he may never live to come back. In any case Gerald will be his heir, and will succeed to the Manor House property. He will be a rich and prosperous man if he lives to grow up; but I think if he neglects this opportunity, and lets his poor old grandfather go away again without the kiss of peace, he will bitterly repent his wicked malice to his life's end. He is old enough now to understand things in their true light, and his mind has regained its balance, and if he does not wilfully blind his eyes he cannot help seeing the debt of gratitude he really owes to his grandfather. He has been properly taught by his mother, who with all her faults, was at heart a good woman, and when softened by trouble she turned to the source where comfort is always to be found. Gerald has not even the excuse of ignorance, and if he neglects the opportunity now before him he will most likely rue it to his life's end."

Grandmother spoke so seriously that I felt almost awed, but I quite understood the import of her words. I felt that it would be a very shocking thing if Gerald persisted in his unreasoning hatred of the grandfather, who was

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really so good to him, and who, even in the first instance, had had much more to suffer than the boy's parents, whom he thought so much injured. It was a pity his mother had not made things clearer to him whilst she was alive; but I suppose that she felt she could not say anything that should cast a reflection on her husband, and then Gerald seemed always to have been peculiar, and might easily have declined to believe anything he did not quite like.

"And one thing more," added grandmother after a pause, "there are a great many ways in which Gerald might improve his health if he only would submit to the orders laid down for him by the doctor. He has a sort of iron framework that would give him immense support if he would only wear it for a few hours a day, and would help to cure him faster than anything. Lying flat on his back is another thing recommended, and so is the taking of certain tonics that he has grown very much to dislike, and now won't take at all. With another kind of boy a doctor might absolutely insist on having his orders carried out, but Gerald is so peculiar and so morbidly sensitive that to insist in his case might do more harm than good; and the risk of those terrible outbreaks of passion is to

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be avoided as far as possible, as they are worse for him than anything. If, however, you can either of you use your influence with him to get him of his own free will to take these steps for his own good, the benefit will very soon be seen; and, if he has as much sense as I believe, he will be willing now to listen to reason."

That same afternoon, instead of going to the old house as usual, I took Tim into the wilderness, and we had a long, long talk together. I fancied that Tim would be the prime agent in the plot entrusted to our management, and with the earnest, silent zeal into which he entered into it, I felt certain success would not be lacking through any fault of his.

I don't think it was possible for Tim altogether to dissociate the real from the ideal, where the inmate of the old house was concerned. He and Gerald had woven such a net-work of fiction around the facts of his life that it was only at brief moments Tim realized he was only a peculiar but perfectly modern boy. I believe it was this power of idealizing him as a kind of hero that gave my small brother such power over Gerald; but even I was surprised at the extent of his power as the following days passed by.

Next morning was so very hot that Tim

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suggested he should not come home to dinner, but should dine with Gerald or Dame Truman. He had often been invited to do this before, but had declined as it "might arouse suspicion."

"You see," he now explained to Aunt Tabitha, "I don't think anyone could suspect anything to-day. I think it would be a great risk to come across the fields in the mid-day heat. If I were to get a sunstroke you would all be sorry."

So off he went in the cool of the morning, and I promised to follow when the sun had lost some of his power. It was a cooler walk to the old house late in the day than early.

I went a drive with grandmother after lunch, and at about four o'clock she dropped me not far from the gates of the Manor House to go up and bring Tim home.

Gerald no longer kept himself secluded in the one wing as heretofore. He wandered fearlessly all over the house and garden, and when I entered by the usual side door I heard voices proceeding from a bare ill-lighted room in the basement, which we sometimes used as a prison in our games.

Making my way cautiously thither I soon came within sight of the place, and there was Tim

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strutting up and down in front of the door, an old rusty iron basin on his head for a helmet, and a piece of a broken pike in his hand, which he always carried when doing sentry duty. In the "cell" was Gerald, standing with a look of calm resignation and lofty purpose on his face, whilst upon his back was strapped a curious-looking apparatus of bars and thongs, which I knew at once was the back-board grandmother had spoken of which Gerald had been told to wear to get his spine right.

"Will you confess now?" asked Tim in a tone of furious menace, striding up to the prisoner and standing just in front of him.

"No," answered Gerald with great firmness; and Tim made a feint of dealing a blow at him with his heavy weapon.

Turning to resume his march he caught sight of me, and ran up eagerly.

"He's a mediæval prisoner," he explained eagerly, "and he knows about a plot of a rival baron's; and this baron, who is wicked and cruel, says he shall wear that thing that hurts him very much till he confesses who are concerned in it. He won't confess, of course; and then, after he's worn it a long time, you're to come as a noble maiden, and command the jailer to take it off at

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nights. It's about time now, so you can come and order his release. Just wait a minute and watch me. You must see me insult the prisoner, for that raises your righteous indignation."

So, whilst I waited a moment, Tim resumed his strut, pausing every now and then to utter an unearthly noise, which he afterwards explained to me was "a ribald laugh." I came on the scene and did my part, though I think Gerald would have been as well pleased at my keeping away. The games were real enough to him so long as he and Tim were alone, the child's intense belief in them giving to them an additional reality and charm. My presence, I am afraid, a little destroyed the illusion for Gerald, and I suspect he fancied that I knew more than he cared about the curious back-board he was wearing. However, I tried to get him to think it was as real to me as to them, and I resolved I would never interrupt them again when they were playing this particular game.

From Dame Truman I presently illicited the information that "prison games" were now regularly instituted, and that Gerald wore his back-board, or lay flat on the floor for quite a good spell, several times in the day, whilst enacting the part of a supposed prisoner in cruel captivity

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Gerald, as I had before learned, loved to pose as a hero and an oppressed martyr; and I daresay that Tim's fervent belief in his heroic conduct really resigned him to what had been so distasteful once.

Imagination reconciles children to all kinds of things if once it can be successfully enlisted on the right side; and the idea that he was suffering untold things for his lord, his king, or his country enabled Gerald to submit with something like eagerness to the tedium and slight discomfort of the back-board and the floor. He even took doses of physic when administered as a restoring draught by the hand of the faithful minstrel or some "holy father;" and partly from these medical and surgical aids, partly from the healthful impetus given by the association with other people, Gerald looked a different being from the white wasted boy of a month back.

As yet, however, no farther allusion had been made (to my knowledge) to the subject of the reconciliation. That was the next step of the little drama.

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CHAPTER X.

GERALD'S LETTER.

I NEVER quite knew how it was done. The credit, if credit was due to us, as people seemed to think, was certainly Tim's, not mine; for although at this time Gerald began to talk to me in a more serious strain than he had done before, and although if I had the chance of doing so, I tried to put in a word to let him see what a sad thing it was for families to be divided and for people to hate one another, yet I never dared to speak openly of the subject that must often have been in both our minds, and he was just as silent and reserved about it as I was.

Tim, however, appeared to enjoy a greater amount of his confidence; and I began to guess how things were going when he came to me one day and said:

"Dinah, do tell me some reconciliations in history. We want to play at them, and I can only think of Charles the Second and Monmouth,

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and Elizabeth and Mary, and they were women and are no good. Gerald does Richard Cœur de Lion at the bier of his father *beautifully;* but then Henry was dead, so it can't count as a reconciliation quite. Do tell us some nice ones—fathers and sons or grandfathers and grandsons would be best. I don't care if they're in books or made up out of your own head, we can act them just as well."

I supplied some suitable scenes by the aid of memory and imagination, and Tim trotted off quite content. I was pretty sure after this that something of the beauty and nobility of forgetting past wrongs and rising above petty distrusts and malice would not be long in finding its way to Gerald's mind. He was always susceptible of impression; and by letting his thoughts dwell upon themes of generosity and devotion would be likely to see how perverted his own mind had been.

Presently I discovered that another motive was at work in the boy's mind, and perhaps I felt all the more certain of success by the conviction that self-interest as well as an abstract sense of right was enlisted on our side. I suppose the motives of the best of us are sadly mixed sometimes; it would not do to think hardly of Gerald because his were the same.

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It was again Tim who brought me the new idea.

"Dinah," he said, "I asked Gerald why he wouldn't ever go to church, and why he still kept shut up now that he is better and would really like to go about more, and what do you think he said?"

"I suppose he does not like being seen till his back is straight again."

"No, it isn't quite that—not all that, I mean. He can hold himself up ever so much better since we played prisoners and dungeon cells; and I took him to look at himself in a big glass downstairs the other day, and really he was quite surprised to see how little it showed. He was a good bit worse, he says, before he came here, and has been growing better ever since, though not so fast as he is growing now. Why he won't go out now is that people would laugh at him and think him silly for staying shut up here so long."

"Is that really all?"

"That's most of it, I think; because he really would like to come and see Aunt Tabby's flowers and my garden, where everything comes up all mixed. I don't think it's really as nice as the garden here where things are in order, and

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where Aunt Tabby had them when they were young to pinch back and nip and tie. But he says he would like to see it, only he doesn't choose to be laughed at."

"Aunt Tabitha would not laugh."

"No, but he thinks other people would when they heard how he'd kept himself shut up."

"I don't think they would. We didn't laugh. Besides he'll have to come out some time. He can't live always shut up; and what is the good of waiting?"

"Well, that's what I said," returned Tim, "and at first he didn't seem quite to know how to answer; but at last it came out that perhaps his grandfather will come and see him soon, and if *he* comes and they go out together, Gerald thinks people will think that they came together too."

"Oh!" I said; "and do you really think Gerald has stopped hating his grandfather."

"I think so almost. I don't think he *likes* him yet; but I don't think he hates him so much, He doesn't get angry when we talk about him. and sometimes we have played at 'the reconciliation of the Ducies.' Gerald is going to write a long poem about it—he's done a few bits already. He writes poetry most beautifully. It's a great secret, you know, Dinah; but he lets me

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see what he writes. Sometimes we make up a bit together. He says poetry needn't rhyme; but I told him I was *sure* it wouldn't be real poetry if it didn't, and so it's to be in rhyme now. We've got some beautiful lines, only it is so hard to get things to rhyme. One of them is:

'Behold the hour of reconciliation!'

but we cannot think of anything to rhyme with reconciliation except transubstantiation, and that doesn't seem to fit in somehow. But about Gerald—I really think he's going to write to his grandfather soon. We've made up a lot of beautiful letters, and some day I think he'll copy one out and send it. I think he'll talk about it to you some day, Dinah. He thinks a great deal about your opinion. He said once he thought you were very good, and I told him you were."

"Oh, Tim, you shouldn't have said that. It isn't true."

"Yes, but it is. You're always good to me, as good as gold; and I heard Aunt Tabby and grandmother talk about you and say you were very like Aunt Dinah, and we know that *she* was very good. So there!"

It is always pleasant to be praised; and I was glad that Gerald liked me, for he talked so much

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less openly to me than to Tim that sometimes I was half afraid he did not care at all for my company. I had not quite so much time now for going to the old house as I had at first, for grandmother went out more now that the weather was warm, and she was often asked to bring me too, and I went out to tea more days in the week than I had ever done in my life before.

But one afternoon, not long after I had heard Tim speak so definitely about a reconciliation, I spent the afternoon with the two boys, and Gerald began to talk to me about it of his own accord.

We were in the garden, and Tim was very busy over the little cultivated patch—watering, tying and pegging, pulling off dead leaves and faded blossoms, and unconsciously mimicking Aunt Tabitha in his looks and ways in a fashion that often nearly set me off laughing. But I did not really laugh; for Gerald was sitting by me, and he was in one of his rather gloomy moods—at least he was very silent and abstracted, and it was a long time before he spoke, although I fancied he had something on his mind.

"Dinah," he said suddenly, "I want to talk to you about something. I've almost made up my mind and I want to consult you."

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"Yes, Gerald. I should like to help you if I could."

"Well, it's all your doing really—yours and Tim's. You know what I told you that day about myself and about *him*. Well, I've been thinking and thinking ever since about it, and about what you said—sometimes I can hardly sleep at nights for the thoughts that keep coming; and I've made up my mind at last—I'm going to forgive him."

I was very glad to hear this, though I could not help wishing Gerald had put it in another way.

"I've written him a letter," pursued Gerald not observing my silence. "It's all the best pieces of a lot of letters Tim and I have been making up. I've made up my mind to send it. It's all ready to post, only I should just like you to read it before it goes."

He produced from his pocket a very handsome pocket-book (everything Gerald possessed was costly and rich), and took from it a letter addressed to Mr. Ducie at some foreign watering-place. I took out the closely-written sheet and proceeded to peruse the contents.

If the whole thing had not been so serious it would have been almost impossible to help laugh-

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ing, for anything more grandiloquent and high-flown than that letter it would be hard to find. Again and again I recognized little pieces of Tim's unmistakable composition, or phrases picked up from grandmother or Aunt Tabitha and stuck in here with far more regard to sound than sense. If Gerald had lived more in the world of every-day life, and less in the regions of his own morbid imaginings and Tim's romantic fancies, he must have seen that his letter was only saved from downright insolence by its positive absurdity. A mighty emperor addressing the meanest or most criminal of his rebel subjects could not have taken a higher tone, or have expressed his sovereign pardon in terms of greater condescension. Probably Mr. Ducie would know enough of Gerald to see the purpose of the letter, and ignore the curious character of the language addressed to him; but I could not help wishing that if he had made up his mind to write at all, he would conquer himself and his pride still farther, and write humbly and properly.

I did not know what to say when I had done. Gerald had been watching me very closely whilst I read, and I thought he expected a burst of admiration at the close. I could not think of anything to say that would please him, so I remained

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silent, and just folded up the letter and gave it him back.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"I daresay Mr. Ducie will be pleased to get it."

Gerald's face clouded over.

"But don't *you* like it?" he persisted; and then I had to answer sorrowfully:

"No, Gerald; I'm afraid I don't."

"But why not? We took such pains with it. Tim thought it was splendid—so mediæval."

I made a great effort and answered:

"I would much rather it had been really christian, Gerald."

He flushed, and then looked very fierce and sullen. For a short time he was silent, and then he said in his quick imperious way:

"What do you mean?"

"I'm afraid I shall only make you angry if I tell you."

"Never mind, I wish to know."

"Well, Gerald," I answered, speaking as gently as I could, "what I really think is, that if you do write to Mr. Ducie you ought to ask his pardon and explain your mistake."

"*His* pardon! *My* mistake!" gasped Gerald.

"Yes, because you know now that he never got

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those letters your mother wrote, and so he was not cruel and neglectful as you once thought; and he came directly he knew she wanted him, and he has done everything in the world that he could for you, though you were so angry all the time. Of course you were very ill and weak, and did not understand things as you do now, so it was not exactly your fault. But now that you do know how things really were, and can see that Mr. Ducie has been neither harsh nor neglectful really, only very indulgent and kind, it does seem to me rather childish and not quite right to send a letter like that, as if he were a kind of criminal and you a judge or a prince. I believe he is so anxious to see you that he would come even if the letter were worse than that; but it isn't a proper letter for you to write, and I think if you send it to-day you'll be sorry later on that it was not quite different—you'll be ashamed of it by and by, I know."

Gerald suddenly sprang to his feet and dashed into the house. I thought it was to indulge in a fit of passion unseen by us, and I was very sorry. I began to be afraid that I had done harm to my cause by criticising the letter, for Gerald was dreadfully sensitive to blame of any kind, and especially to anything that verged upon ridicule.

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I had not certainly said anything that was in the least like that; but then the letter *was* ridiculous, and possibly Gerald might feel it to be so, when he found it did not read to others as it did to himself. Suppose it ended by his not writing at all! Then I should feel that I had done harm, and spoiled or at least postponed the reconciliation. But Gerald had made me say what I thought, and I could not tell an untruth.

But before I had finished my meditation or come to any conclusion Gerald appeared again; his face wore a brighter, braver look than I was used to see there. It looked as if he had lately won a victory over himself, and was conscious of an inward glow of triumph.

He had what looked like the same letter in his hand, and as he approached he tossed it into my lap saying:

"There, read that, Dinah; and if you like it better post it on your way home," and then he joined Tim over the flowers and did not look at me again for some time.

I found that the envelope contained a different letter this time. It was much shorter, and looked as if it had been hastily put together; nor was the handwriting nearly so good as before. This was what it said:

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"Dear Grandfather,

"I am very sorry I behaved so badly to you last year. I did not understand things properly then, and I think I did not wish to either. I am sorry for it now; and I can see I behaved very badly, though not perhaps quite so badly as it must have seemed to you. I am very much obliged for all your kindness to me, and I hope you will come and see me soon. I should like it very much, and I hope we shall be friends. Please forgive me for my bad temper and all the trouble I gave, and write to me to say if you can come and see me. I like the old house as much as ever; but I want to go out again now, only I would rather wait till you come so that we can go together.

"I am,

"Your dutiful and affectionate grandson,

"GERALD DUCIE."

"*P.S.*—Dinah and Tim Meredith are my great friends. I am sure you will like them too."

That letter was posted as Tim and I went home. We went on purpose by the road through the village, and Tim felt very proud as he dropped the important missive in the box. He did not know there had been any change in the contents

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of the envelope, and he quoted pieces of the original to me in very dramatic style as we went along. I did not tell him of the change; I did not know if Gerald would like it. Besides, Tim would hardly have understood. He was too simple-minded to enter into any complex situation, and his passion for anything "mediæval" blinded his eyes to the real character of the document in question. The moment he got home, however, he let the cat out of the bag by going straight up to Aunt Tabitha and demanding:

"Suppose you had just posted a letter to Germany in the grocer's shop to-day, how long would it be before you would expect to get an answer?"

I felt grandmother's glance resting upon me; but she asked no questions till dinner-time, when I came down to the drawing-room ten minutes before the hour. I then told her something of what had happened, and was pleased and rather excited when she turned to Aunt Tabitha and said:

"Mark my word, we shall be seeing our old friend here before a week is out. He will not answer the boy's letter in writing—he will just come himself."

I saw Gerald again next day. Tim was as before busy over the flowers, which seemed to

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want a good deal of attention that day. It was rather hot for playing games, and his companion hardly seemed in the mood for it.

Gerald's face was, however, brighter than was often the case. He was restless and excited, but not with the restlessness of dissatisfaction. He had seemed a little shy of me at first that day, but presently he came and threw himself down on the grass beside me, turning his face a little away.

"Dinah," he said, "I am very glad I wrote that letter yesterday—that second one. You posted it, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. It was a very nice letter, Gerald."

"I'm so glad you like it. Yes, the first one was horrid! I'm so glad it didn't go. I read it again last night after I'd said my prayers, and then I tore it up and burned it. I am so glad you wouldn't let it go."

"It's very nice of you not to be cross with me, Gerald."

"Cross with *you!*" he repeated with emphasis; "for helping me to do what I've been wanting to do this ever so long, only I've been half ashamed to think so or say so. I knew *you* thought it was wrong to go on being so angry, and I knew you were ever so much better than I was.

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although I did try to think myself so good. I haven't forgotten any of the things you've said, Dinah, when we've been talking. I think of them and turn them over in my mind; and when I look in my books I find it says just the same there. It was very hard to make up my mind, but I did make it up at last. Tim and I talked about it, and played at it, and it all helped to make things easier, especially when I heard about those letters having been lost; but I couldn't have done it if I hadn't felt sure you thought it wrong to go on as I was doing. Then I tried to think it was very grand and noble of me to forgive, and it was when I was in that kind of mood that I wrote the letters that the first one was made up of. I didn't always feel like that—sometimes I saw things much more as they really were. I have been trying not to be so passionate and proud and irritable, only, though I do think I sometimes am getting better, there are other times when I seem just as bad as ever. I am so glad I didn't send that letter. Dinah, do you think grandfather will come?"

"I am almost sure he will."

"Do you think he will live always in the old house with me?"

I looked at him in a little surprise.

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"No, Gerald; don't you know he is ill. He cannot live in England. He can only come there in the summer for a little while. Most likely he will not live a great deal longer."

Gerald looked very grave and rather pale.

"Is that so, really, Dinah? I did not know."

"Did not Tim tell you?"

"No. He said something, but I didn't think it was like that. Oh, I am glad I have written! But I think I am glad, too, that I did not know first. It was not *that* that made me decide. Poor grandfather!"

He was silent and grave a long while, and then he said very thoughtfully:

"Dinah, I think it's quite true what Tim says about the flowers and plants."

"What do you mean, Gerald?"

"Why, you know, about their growing so much better for being trained and pruned and kept under when they're young. It's the same with us, I'm almost sure. If my mother hadn't been so very, very kind to me always, and given me my own way in everything, and indulged me in all my self-will and whims, perhaps I should have been better and stronger in mind and body than I was. And, perhaps, if her father had been less indulgent to her, and taught her to

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conquer herself some times, things might have been different long ago, and there wouldn't have been that quarrel. Dinah, I hope I sha'n't always want my own way as much as I now do. I hope you'll sometimes remind me about things if you see me getting self-willed again, for indeed, indeed I do want to be different. I should like to be a comfort to grandfather, indeed I should; and I do hope he will live a great many years still. I shall pray that he may, and I hope you and Tim will too."

I promised that willingly, and Gerald and I parted with a new sense of understanding and good-will.

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CHAPTER XI.

RECONCILIATION.

A FEW days later, when Phœbe brought us our breakfast in our upstairs parlour, she seemed brimming over with a kind of mysterious excitement and importance.

"What do you think, Miss Dinah! Old Mr. Ducie has come back to the old house and brought his grandson with him! Leastways there's two of them there now, for the milkman as takes up Dame Truman's drop of milk saw them out in the garden together, walking under the trees, though he did hear tell in the village that the old gentleman was alone when he drove through in the fly last evening. But Flint he do say it can't be none but a grandson, for he's as like poor Miss Geraldine as one face can be like another, and *he's* lived in the place this twenty years and more. Them Ducies always was odd in their ways; there's no accounting like for their comings or goings. It'll be a fine

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thing for the place if the old house is lived in again. I do hope the ghost will let them bide there quietly."

Tim looked up in a sort of scorn.

"Ghost!" he repeated. "There isn't any ghost there; I wish there were. I don't believe there's any ghosts at all now. I believe they're all old mediæval traditions."

Phœbe was quenched at once. She had an idea that Tim's erudition was something vast and boundless. He chatted to her a good deal as she helped him at nights, and though he had never betrayed the secret of Gerald's existence, he had talked with great dramatic effect of our games at the old house, and had confided to me that he thought the girl very ignorant.

"She doesn't know what a caitiff minion is," he complained one day; "and she does not know what I mean when I say, 'Avaunt, sirrah!' or anything like that. It makes it rather stupid, because if she were not quite so ignorant we could play at things whilst I went to bed; but she spoils everything by stopping to ask 'What's that, Master Tim?' when I'm not Master Tim at all, but Sir Philip Sidney, perhaps, or the Dauphin, or Prince Charley. It spoils it all, you see."

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So Phœbe grew to have an immense idea of my young brother's mental attainments, which idea was decidedly strengthened by the notice our aunt came to take of him, and the way they seemed to fraternize.

She retired now somewhat discomfited, both by Tim's scorn and by having let slip a word of the ghost in his presence; but when she had gone the little boy jumped off his chair and began careering about the room in a state of decided excitement.

"He's come, Dinah, he's come!" he cried; "and they've had the reconciliation or they wouldn't be walking in the garden together before breakfast. How I wish I'd seen it! I wonder what it was like! I must ask Gerald. He'll tell me all about it, I know, and then we can act it ourselves. I wonder if he would like me to go and see him this morning. I don't want to *intrude;* but I should like to see that old man and hear how he talks. Is he *very* old, Dinah? old enough to be mediæval, I mean? It would be so nice if he were. Grandmother and Aunt Tabby do very well for antiques, but I don't think they're mediæval somehow."

I was glad to let Tim chatter on whilst I ate my breakfast and thought about Gerald, and

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wondered what was going on in the old house. I told Tim I thought he had better not go till we had asked grandmother and heard what she had said, and when we went down to prayers I saw at a glance that the important piece of news had already reached our elders' ears. There was a little pink flush in grandmother's face, and Aunt Tabitha had an air of abstraction quite unusual for her.

Grandmother, as I had expected, decided against any morning visit to Gerald, though she thought we might both go over later in the day, to see our friend and his newly-found relative. So Tim gave his morning to Aunt Tabitha and the flowers, and I sat over my work in the parlour and talked a good deal to grandmother of the Ducies past and present, telling her of Gerald's words to me about it all, which struck and pleased her very much.

"You see, Dinah, my dear," she said presently, "that wealth and luxury do not always make people any happier. You have not known a great deal so far of the pleasures of riches, but I think you are old enough to see that your more hardy training has not been a bad thing for you. You do not know anything about family discord in your home. You have other things to think

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of; and children who grow up together without all the indulgences that great wealth can buy have to amuse themselves and to make their own pleasures; and it does not seem hard to them to give up their own will sometimes, because they get their sharp angles rubbed off against each other, and are accustomed from childhood to bear and forbear. You need never be sorry, my dear, for the comparative poverty of your early home. It has taught you some very valuable lessons."

I had never thought of complaining of our lot; it had never occurred to me that it was hard to be rather poor and to keep only a few servants, and to have no carriage or garden or greenhouse. I had enjoyed the pleasant luxury of grandmother's house, to be sure; but even there at first I had many times suffered from home-sickness, and longed to feel myself back in my own home again, despite its plainness and barrenness. It never seemed to me that there was any hardship in being comparatively poor. We were very happy, and unless mother got overworked there was never anything really to trouble us. But thinking over grandmother's words I was able to see their wisdom. Contrasting our home with that of the rich but unhappy Ducies, one could not fail to be struck with the difference. I do

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not mean that I thought it was absolutely being rich that had made them so proud and self-willed; but I could see very clearly that if they had been more like other people, and had had their living to work for, and had not been accustomed to have everything they wished for just as a matter of course, they might have learned more self-restraint and forbearance and not have brought all that unhappiness and misery upon themselves. It must be very pleasant at the time always to have just what one wants; but I do not think the plan answers in the long run. It is not the kind of plan advocated in the Bible at any rate; and I think the Bible rules ought always to be the final test of everything, though some people say that is an old-fashioned notion.

Well, to go back to my story, I had a nice talk with grandmother all the morning; but I am afraid Aunt Tabitha had had rather a hard time of it with Tim, although she did not look at all cross, only rather amused and rather fatigued. When Tim is excited he always must talk; and I think he had given poor Aunt Tabitha a dose that morning, having quite lost his awe of her, for as I came up she was saying:

"I wish I could plant that tongue of yours, Tim, and keep it quiet somewhere."

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"Suppose you did, what would it come up? Something red and flat like an anthurium?"

"Something very difficult to keep in order, I think," was the reply.

"Would it be a stove plant? or would it be half hardy? And do you think it would be an annual or a perennial?"

"Oh, a perennial, I am afraid—a very hardy perennial. No chance of losing it if one once had it."

"But suppose—"

"Tim, I absolutely decline to suppose a single other thing to-day. My imagination really will not stand the strain. And here in good time comes Dinah: you go to her and suppose what you like. Your mother had the confidence to assert once that *you* were a quiet child. I wonder what your brothers and sisters can be like!"

"Tim only talks like that to people he is really fond of, Aunt Tabitha," I explained later on when I had a chance of doing so unheard. "He is very quiet generally with most people. He only talks at home to me, and sometimes to mother if he can get her alone. I hope he isn't troublesome. We never thought of his talking so much to you."

Aunt Tabitha laughed in her rather grim way.

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"It never occurred to you that the child could be fond of me, eh? No, you needn't blush so, Dinah, I know you didn't mean that; but if you think I don't know that I'm a cross-grained, cantankerous old woman, not likely to take young people's fancy, you're very much mistaken. I know it as well as other folks do; and as for the boy, he's welcome to chatter away to his heart's content. It amuses him and does me no harm. Sometimes it amuses me too."

This was as much as saying that Tim had found his way to a soft spot in Aunt Tabitha's heart, of which fact I had gradually become aware.

That same afternoon Tim and I, rather more brushed-up and spruce than we generally troubled to make ourselves, walked up somewhat silently to the old house. Tim, though quite quiet now, was evidently rehearsing some scene in his head all the way up; but it did not seem like a game to me at all. Strange as it had all been at first, and rather romantic too for these prosaic days, I had grown too much accustomed to the idea of the lonely boy shut up by his own desire to feel that there was anything so very odd in it. My thoughts were engrossed by the picture of the broken-down old man, whose

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daughter had repaid his love by running away and leaving him desolate. How I did hope that Gerald would by his love and dutiful conduct make up a little for what he had gone through.

We approached the house by way of the ruin, and emerged from the tangled undergrowth into the south garden in front of the main block of building. I had half expected to find Gerald out of doors such a very warm, fine afternoon, and it was not exactly a surprise, therefore, to see him in his favourite place beneath the big elm-tree on the lawn; but what made it seem so very strange was that he was no longer alone. A very handsome but feeble-looking old man, with perfectly white hair, was sitting beside him in a large wicker chair, and Gerald's hand was resting on his knee, and the boy's eyes were fixed upon the wrinkled face in a fashion that plainly indicated an advanced stage of intimacy.

"They have had the reconciliation, then," breathed Tim softly. "I almost hoped I should have been in time to see it."

In a few more seconds Gerald saw us. He flushed up a little, I fancied, and started away a pace or two from Mr. Ducie's side; and then as we approached he came forward a few steps to meet us. His manner was a little more con-

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strained than usual, which seemed natural enough. It pleased Tim too, as being more like the imaginary scenes he had pictured.

"I wish to present you to my grandfather," he said, unheeding Tim's whispered suggestion that it would sound better to say "grandsire," and the next minute I found both my hands taken very gently in those of the old gentleman, who was looking earnestly at me out of a pair of dark eyes very like Gerald's own.

"My dear," he said in a kind, quiet voice, "you are very like another Dinah I knew long years ago, and loved for her goodness and sweetness. I have a great deal to thank you for, and I hope to be able to do it so as to please myself and you too. Will you let me kiss you, my dear? Your forefathers and mine have been friends and comrades for many generations."

I stooped and kissed the old man's pale face. I had not expected Mr. Ducie to be at all like this. I had fancied I should feel afraid of him.

Tim next came in for a share of notice; but he was very silent. He had not confidence to make a speech in the style he would have liked to adopt, and he did not care to stoop to an ordinary commonplace form of address. He was evidently very anxious to get hold of Gerald alone, and

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learn from him the whole history of the reconciliation; but it was some little time before the boy could be tempted away from his grandfather's side, and by the time that Tim had succeeded in drawing off his companion, I had begun to feel quite at home with the old man. He looked after the retiring pair with a smile in his eyes. His face, though worn and sad as if from illness and trouble, was now very calm and peaceful. It wore a look that made me love him, although I had only known him such a very little while. Presently he turned to me with such a kind smile.

"My dear," he said, "I do not know how to thank you for what you have done for that poor boy of mine."

"I am so glad you are pleased about it; but it has really been much more Tim's doing than mine."

"Well, my dear, I cannot quite dissociate you from your little brother, but between you you have worked a metamorphosis I could hardly have believed possible. If you had seen that poor boy a year ago you would hardly believe that he could be the same. And the physical change is not the only one—he is a different being in himself."

"He has changed a good deal the two months

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we have known him," I answered. "But he had got much better during the winter too, I think. Dame Truman was very kind to him, and the quiet and the feeling of security he had here helped him to get on."

"Yes, the lad's mind recovered its balance when the shock of his grief abated, and there was nothing in his surroundings to remind him of the past, or to arouse his morbid irritability; but of course loneliness and isolation are not good for the young, and though for a time it was thought best to humour him and yield to him in his wish for absolute solitude, yet we had all become anxious at the length of time the freak lasted. It was becoming urgent for health and spirits alike that he should come out of his prison, yet the least attempt to get him to do this brought back the old fits of passion, the old morbid feeling that his misfortune and infirmity had for ever marked him off from other men and made him an object of compassion, if not of ridicule. The doctor said that to force his inclinations would do harm rather than good, but that it must if possible be contrived that he himself should wish for variety and companionship. I was almost in despair when I heard this verdict; for I knew the pride and stubbornness of the

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Ducie temperament, and I could not think how it was to be accomplished. But your grandmother was the wise woman who solved the difficulty. She and Truman concocted a plot between them, and you and your brother carried it out. My dear boy, my only living relative, has been restored to me, and in him I seem to see my own sweet child over again. Do you wonder that I rejoice, that I am grateful?"

He was speaking at last almost more to himself than to me, and I was glad I had not to make any answer. It seemed so very little that Tim and I had done that it embarrassed me to be so much thanked. We had played about the old house to amuse ourselves, and when we had discovered Gerald's secret we had played with him too. Of course we had tried to persuade him to give up his angry thoughts and feelings, as anyone in our place would have done. But if Gerald had not been really anxious in his own way to be a noble, upright, Christian gentleman our words could not have made any great impression. It was because he had thought, and prayed, and struggled during those solitary months before we knew him that he was so ready to yield at last. He had blinded his eyes for a time by only looking at one side of the question, and thinking of

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the past in a way that seemed almost to justify his own anger; but when he began really to understand the question, and to think more seriously and justly of his own attitude of mind, this had at once begun to change, or else he never would have yielded his stubborn will so soon. Gerald really had lofty ideals; he had a wish to do and to feel rightly. If it had not been for this Tim and I could have done nothing for him, or at least nothing like what we were credited with.

I tried to explain something of this to Mr. Ducie by and by, and I saw he was much pleased to hear Gerald praised, and to learn that he had had another side to his character even when he had seemed most wild and unapproachable. We got very friendly over that talk, and our friendly feeling increased as days passed by. Gerald's wish was destined to be gratified, for all the village people, with very few exceptions, believed that he and his grandfather had arrived at the same time, and when they appeared together in the lanes and fields no more than the ordinary amount of curiosity was excited by their appearance. Gerald looked so handsome now that he was better in health and happy in the novelty and variety of his life; and he held himself so

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well and spoke with such readiness and ease that nobody thought him peculiar in any way. The slight stoop was hardly noticed by the unobservant country people, and those of them who remembered his mother were always telling him that he was her very image. Gerald was never tired of hearing this, for his mother was the idol of his imagination. Every day he looked brighter and happier, and every day seemed to leave his curious past more completely in the background.

The greatest triumph to us was upon the second Sunday after Mr. Ducie's arrival, when he and Gerald entered the church together and took their seats in the long untenanted Manor House pew. Nobody else would have noticed anything strange in Gerald's appearance, but we could see that he was greatly moved and excited. The last time he had been inside a church his mother had been with him, as he had told me with some emotion only a day or two ago, and it was only natural that he should feel a good deal as he knelt beside his grandfather in the church she had come to Sunday by Sunday, when she had been young like himself. Probably she might have occupied the very place he was in now, have felt the same sort of admiration and awe for the beautiful old building with all its associations of the past. No

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wonder the boy looked red and pale by turns, and started at the sound of the organ; but as the service proceeded he grew more quiet and composed, and at last a look of calm happiness settled down upon his face, and deepened till it became quite beautiful to see. I was sure then, that whatever happened in the future Gerald would never repent of his present conduct or return to his old wild ways.

"I am so happy, Dinah," he whispered to me as we came out of church. "I have never been so really happy all my life before. I do love grandfather so very much, and we understand one another quite now. And, Dinah, I am so glad I sent the second letter instead of the first that day."

"Gerald has never told me the whole story," remarked Tim as we went home together. "He says there wasn't anything to tell—that it wasn't a bit like any of the rehearsals we'd had. I can't think what it could have been like, then, for we'd done it in every way we could think of—I didn't know there could be any other way left. It's curious Gerald can't remember—isn't it, Dinah?"

"I don't know, Tim. Perhaps he doesn't like to talk about it."

"No, I don't think he does much; that's partly

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why it's so funny. If it had happened to me I should be talking of it all the day."

I think I understood Gerald's reticence better; but I said nothing in explanation, for my little brother was hardly of an age to understand, I thought.

"Anyway," concluded Tim after a pause, "Gerald is very happy and it's all quite nice, though not perhaps quite so romantic as when there was a secret. I think there's something very interesting about a reconciliation."

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CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

IN one way I have really got to the end of my story now, because the secret of the old house was a secret no longer, and Gerald went about the place and called with his grandfather upon his mother's old friends, just as though he had only lately come amongst us; and a great many of the people never knew that he had been living in the shut-up Manor House for pretty nearly a year.

But many unexpected things began to happen just then that so altered the face of affairs for Tim and me that I cannot help winding up my story with some account of them, more especially as they have a good deal to do with Gerald too.

The first of these things that happened after the arrival of old Mr. Ducie, was that about a month later my father and mother suddenly appeared at grandmother's and stayed there a whole week.

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This was towards the latter end of August, and you may guess how excited Tim and I were on being quite unexpectedly confronted with our parents in grandmother's parlour one afternoon, when we had not the least idea that they were nearer than the Black Country.

Mother, you may be sure, was equally delighted to see us, and the change in our appearance seemed quite to astonish her. We had not thought about this ourselves, but she said she should hardly have known us again. I looked "quite blooming," as she called it; and as for Tim, he was so brown and so sturdy that she hardly knew him for the same boy. She thought he must have grown more than an inch.

"In that case his tongue has grown more than two," remarked Aunt Tabitha in her grim way, that was not really a bit cross when you got to know her. "I'm going to cut a piece of it off one of these days. There's no keeping it quiet as it is."

But this threat never subdued Tim for a moment; he was always greatly interested in the question.

"And then, mother, we're going to plant it and see what comes up," he added eagerly. "I shall help to do the potting. I shall call it

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Timosis Tonguinii, and keep it in the hot-pit; but Aunt Tabby says it ought to be called chatterbox plant, and that it won't want any forcing at all. I should like it to be reared in heat. One always seems to have more control over stove plants, you know; unless the man lets out the fire on a cold night, which of course is very trying."

Tim would have gone on chattering and airing his knowledge indefinitely had mother not laid a hand gently on his lips. She could manage him better than Aunt Tabitha; only I don't think Aunt Tabitha ever really tried to stop his chatter—I think she rather liked it.

It was *so* nice having mother there. I never knew quite how I had missed her until I had got her with us again. But I could not quite think how she had managed to leave the house and the children and come. She told me that they had come on a matter of business, and that Aunt Sarah, father's sister, had come to take care of things in their absence. They could only stay a week on account of father's patients, but they hoped the business might be arranged in that time.

She did not say just then what the business was, and I did not ask, for I knew if she had

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meant me to know she would have told me of herself.

It was a very proud happy moment for me next day when I took her to the cupboard in grandmother's parlour and showed her all the pile of garments we had made for the boys and the children and father, to replenish the stock at home. Mother could hardly believe her eyes as she unfolded and counted them over; and even I, although I knew how many there were, felt half surprised at the show they made. For when one works regularly two hours a day for a good many months the work does grow very fast; and I had grandmother to help me too, and she worked most beautifully and very quickly too. When I told mother that we had been reading instructive books too she was still more pleased, and I felt that my education had got on quite as fast as the needle-work.

"I don't know how to thank you sufficiently, mother," said my mother going over to grandmother and kissing her, "for your goodness to me and mine."

"The best way of thanking me, my dear," answered grandmother, "is by acceding to the plan we discussed last night."

"Indeed, dearest mother, I believe we shall do

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so," was mother's reply. "Arthur has gone to see Dr. Marks and Mr. Ducie to-day. My only fear is that it is too tempting and delightful not to break down somewhere."

"I don't see why it need break down if you are willing. Every one else concerned is exceedingly anxious about its success."

"It is most kind of every one. A good deal must of course depend on Mr. Ducie's interview with Arthur. The boy is peculiar and he might take against the idea."

"He is not likely to take against the father of Tim and Dinah; and Arthur is no stranger to Mr. Ducie, though they have not met for many years. I anticipate no difficulty, unless it be on your husband's part, as in former years."

"Circumstances have entirely changed now; so that Arthur's former scruple ceases to exist."

I was putting away the things in the cupboard whilst this was going on, but when I rose to my feet the conversation was suspended. I think perhaps the speakers had forgotten for a moment that I was in the room.

I was a good deal excited and interested by what I heard, for I felt pretty sure that the business which had brought my father and mother

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down to the south had some connection with a change of residence that would altogether alter the tenor of our life. I had heard from time to time since my arrival at grandmother's of the failing health of the old doctor, and of the probability of his needing a partner or successor soon, but I had hardly dared to encourage a hope that father would be again thought of in that capacity; I fancied perhaps they would want a younger man, such as he was years ago when people half asked him to settle amongst them. Now I could not help feeling almost certain that this old plan was coming up again; but I asked no questions, as I knew mother would tell me all when it was settled.

Three days passed very happily. We did not see much of father; but we took mother to all our favourite haunts, and told her all that had happened to us during our long visit to grandmother. We found that she knew all about Gerald already, although she was pleased to hear our version of the story; and she readily came with us to see him, and won his heart directly, I could see, by her sweetness and motherly ways.

I always think there is something different about our mother from other people's mothers

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—something gentler, and tenderer and sweeter. I suppose perhaps it is because she *is* our mother that I feel so. Very likely other children and girls feel the same about theirs—not always, though, I think.

Well, it was the evening of the fourth day that I really heard the wonderful news—which turned out to be a good deal more wonderful than I had expected. Mother came upstairs with me when I went to bed, and told me all about it as I undressed. We had a very long talk indeed, but I will put it down more shortly here.

It seemed that old Dr. Marks wished to retire from the practice, and make it over to a competent man who would give satisfaction to his patients. His son, whom he meant to succeed him, had died a few years ago, and he and his wife had no one else they cared about who could come after him. They were both well-to-do people, and did not care about making much money by the sale of the practice. Dr. Marks had not known at the time it happened of the attempts some people had made years ago to set up Mrs. Talbot's son-in-law as a rival to him; but latterly the story had come to his ears, as had also father's steady refusal to act in a way that seemed

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to him unprofessional and unfair. Dr. Marks had been very much pleased at this conduct in a young man with his way to make in life, and it had ended by his offering him the practice at a purely nominal figure. Our parents had come down to look into things, and feel sure they were justified in accepting such a tempting offer; but they had found that they could do so with a perfectly clear conscience, and in fact in two month's time they expected to be settled here for good.

But the most curious part of the story was still to come; for it had actually been arranged that the old house was to be our home, and that Gerald was to live with us there!

Mother explained how it was that this very odd arrangement had been made.

It seems that Gerald's London doctor had been to see him a week or two ago, and had had a long talk about him with Mr. Ducie. Although so very much better and stronger he was still a very delicate boy, and would be for many years to come. His health would want constant watching, and it was thought that the best thing for him would be to place him in the household of some skilful medical man, who would keep an eye on his health, and see that he did not overdo

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either mind or body in the process of development, that now threatened to be rapid. Solitude was very bad for him now that the morbid craving for it had passed; yet his grandfather could not live in England, and it was not desirable to take the boy abroad. His own clinging to the old house was such that it seemed unkind to remove him, and it was Gerald himself who cut the Gordian knot and suggested the solution of the difficulty.

He would not live, he said, with any doctor but Dr. Meredith, and if he was coming to live in the place as its doctor, why could he not live in the Manor House as well as anywhere else? It seemed quite simple to the boy, though at first people shook their head and smiled and said "impossible." Yet in the end that was what was arranged; and Mr. Ducie was delighted to put the old house in order and have it inhabited again. Instead of paying a handsome sum for Gerald's living with us, we were to live rent free in the Manor House; and most of the outdoor servants were to be paid by Mr. Ducie really, though father would engage them and keep them in order. Gerald was to have a tutor, too, at his grandfather's cost; though any of us that were advanced enough were to share his studies, as it

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was considered so much better for him not to work alone. Also Mr. Ducie had made a new will appointing father Gerald's guardian during his minority, and putting in a clause asking him to remain at the Manor House till his ward came of age. The old man's health was so frail, that although by care and by living mostly abroad he might live for a few years, yet he might not survive another winter; and it was necessary to provide for the boy in case of his death. It was a responsible charge, but father had undertaken it; for the Ducies and my mother's family had been friends for generations, and he had known the old man well in past years, and had liked and respected him.

I could see that mother would have liked better to have a smaller independent home of our own, if she had only consulted her own wishes alone; but then houses were scarce in that part of the world, and the Ducies were so very much set on this Manor House scheme. Father and mother both think a great deal of acting kindly by others and doing as they would be done by, and as for Tim and me we thought it all perfectly delightful, and couldn't see a single drawback anywhere.

Gerald was just as delighted as we were. He

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was in a great state of excitement about the re modelling of the establishment and the adornment of the old house.

"It must all be made very perfect for the reception of your mother," he said in his rather grand way, "for I quite adore her; and as for your father, I like and respect him immensely. As I can't live with my grandfather, I would rather live with you than with anybody in the world. I think we shall be very happy; and grandfather will come every year to see me. I don't believe he will die. He is better he says for being happier. I believe he will go on living a great many years yet, and we shall all be very happy together."

"It will all be like one long game," said Tim. "Fancy really living in a house that has been held by Royalists against Roundheads! Nothing in the world could be nicer."

"It is my idea," said Gerald with modest pride. "I think it is a good one."

"Capital!" said Tim. "I shall be head-gardener, you know. I shall look after all the glass, as Aunt Tabby does at home. She will tell me how, and I shall do it; but I don't think I shall be able to spare her a piece of my tongue after all, because I shall want it all to talk to the gar-

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deners with, and to explain to them what they have to do. They want a deal of looking after and talking to—Aunt Tabby says so herself."

THE END.

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